

Subject: The future of Merritt Island NWR & KSC lands

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Hello All,

Monday Feb. 25, 2008 I attended two meetings at Titusville City Hall. These meetings were set up by NASA to gather public comments (scoping) & to inform & involve the public regarding a proposed commercial vertical launch complex. The meetings were scheduled for 1:00 PM & 6:00 PM & were attended by about 300 people. Almost every person who spoke expressed their support of the overall space program & expressed their displeasure with both of the alternative sites that have been identified to date. Site 2 almost always being described as worse than site 1. A number of present & former space program employees spoke as well.

A common theme presented by a large number of speakers, including the space program employees, was that there are a number of areas located on the Kennedy Space Center or at Canaveral Air Force Station to the south where old launch pads exist and are not being used, or will soon be out of use. In these areas there would be little or no environmental concerns regarding wildlife habitat. About 15 listed species of animals are found in the proposed areas, including the largest Florida Scrub Jay population in the world.

NASA owned properties include KSC as well as Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge & Canaveral National Seashore. The refuge property is administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service & the National Park Service administers the National Seashore. So, if NASA wants to build something in the refuge, they own the land.

In 2007 NASA commissioned the "KSC Vertical Launch Site Evaluation Study" to evaluate potential Commercial Vertical Launch Complex (CVLC) site locations on NASA owned property. Based on this study, NASA selected two potential sites for further evaluation. Alternative 1 is located along the Atlantic coast south of Shuttle launch complex 39A and north of the Atlas launch complex 41. This is in the area that the public knows as KSC & is closed to the public. Alternative 2 is located in MINWR east of SR 3, north of SR 406 and south of the Scrub Ridge Trail. Charles Lee Director of Advocacy for Audubon of Florida stated at the 6:00 PM meeting that both of these two sites are unacceptable, & that locating the facility at site 1 would actually cause more ecological damage than locating it at site 2. Site 1 has a large population of Florida Scrub Jays, Florida Gopher Tortoises, Florida Beach Mice & Indigo Snakes. Locating the facility in the refuge could result in as yet undetermined permanent & temporary closings in a number of areas in the refuge. Location of the facility at this location could cause untold harm to people in the guiding business, hunters & a reduction of local business across the board.

As a second step in determining where this commercial facility should be located NASA is now preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to assess the impacts that the implementation of the proposal at these two sites might have on the environment. Under (NEPA) the "environment" includes the physical (air, water, land) and biological (plants, animals) environments, and human relationships to the environment (i.e. archaeological, cultural, health, safety, jobs, housing, schools, and aesthetics). NEPA does not require that

an EA include the "scoping" meetings that were held on Monday & the two that are scheduled for 10:00 AM & 5:00 PM tomorrow, Thursday Feb. 28, 2008 at the New Smyrna Beach Public Library. So, we appreciate that NASA has concluded that gathering such information is in the best interest of the public and the mission. Following these scoping meetings a Draft EA will be prepared which will be available for public review and written comment. That input will be considered in the preparation of the final EA. The draft EA is scheduled for release in late Spring or early Summer 2008. The final EA should be out in the fall.

As I understand it, during the 2007 study about 14 possible sites on NASA property were investigated & the result was the two aforementioned sites & a third alternative termed No Action, which is the alternative of not implementing the proposal. The rationale used in eliminating any areas on NASA property that are already disturbed & already have at least some infrastructure was not clear to me & I know that Charles had serious concerns regarding that process, or at least on their conclusions that led to the three alternatives that were chosen. As I recall those reasons were given in only the most general of terms, & people who will be attending the meetings tomorrow might want to press the presenters from NASA on a more detailed explanation of that question.

NASA did not consider any sites on the Air Force Base because they have no jurisdiction over Air Force owned land. This is true, but in my opinion, a comprehensive study should be done to determine the most appropriate site for the facility on federally owned land at the cape, regardless of which federal entity currently has jurisdiction. If it should be determined that property located on the Canaveral Air Force Station is indeed the most appropriate, it should be used. If the facility must be on NASA land (which I believe it is, & should be) then a portion of that base should be annexed to the existing KSC property. I know that this process of jurisdictional transfer under normal circumstances can take years. As an example it took several years to transfer the Coast Guard Station on Loggerhead Key in the Dry Tortugas from the US Dept. of Commerce to the US Dept. of the Interior. But, with the Shuttle Program coming to an end in the next two years NASA understandably wants to get THE site selected, & get work under way in an shorter time frame than that! In my opinion these are not normal circumstances, & if the feds want it to happen fast they can make it happen fast!

So, what the situation boils down to is this: Is it worth NASA's time to deal with the Air Force to potentially save 200 acres of valuable irreplaceable habitat inhabited by a host of listed species? Even an ass like me knows that the answer is YES!!! After all, the Department of Defense and NASA are both agencies within the same government! Another question is: Should NASA have even started this process without considering Air force sites? In my opinion the answer is NO. Would it have been that crazy for NASA to have talked to the Air Force before starting this whole process?

Way back a half a century ago when NASA worked out the administration of the now MINWR & CNS areas of the KSC the powers that be probably thought that NASA owns the property so there shouldn't be that big a deal if we want to expand in the future into those areas. Maybe if an expansion had been proposed in 1963 there would have been little outcry, but that was before the last 50 years of habitat destruction & the extinction of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow on Merritt Island, & before Bo Sauselein & Scott Maness died fighting a fire there. Now, we the people who own the property must have a say!

I am under the impression that in the past NASA has been a good steward of the lands that they own & administer. I think that they want to do the RIGHT thing. They just may not at present know what the RIGHT RIGHT thing is. We need to make it crystal clear that THE right thing is to preserve in tact the area with the greatest biodiversity in North America. And, that the environmental community in Central Florida, the country & the world will unite to protect a place that we love so much, that we can't describe it without tears welling up in our eyes. MY old friend mentor & hero Alan Cruickshank was in large part instrumental in the establishment of MINWR & the CNS. The thought that the wildlife trail named in his honor could be lost forever to the public is so hateful to me that I am unable to fully express the true depths of my anger, & disgust and my resolve that this will happen over my dead body!

Please write, call & email all the people who have been mentioned in previous posts.

On behalf of birders everywhere I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Barbara Passmore of Floridabirds & John Puschock of FlaBirding for allowing this information to go out on their lists.

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