



LOUISIANA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

The voice of Louisiana's wildlife and natural resources since 1940.

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March 15, 2023

Louisiana Department of Natural Resources
617 N Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70801

Re: Coastal Use Permit P20190900 application submitted by Commonwealth LNG

To Whom It May Concern:

Louisiana Wildlife Federation (LWF) urges the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources to deny the Coastal Use Permit P20190900 application submitted by Commonwealth LNG. LWF urges the company to work toward finding alternative sites that have less impact on crucial wildlife habitat.

LWF opposes the proposed project siting of Commonwealth LNG at the mouth of Calcasieu Pass due to compelling concerns about damage to the threatened Eastern Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis jamaicensis*) population, critical wildlife habitat, and the coastal environment.

The facility's proposed siting would destroy the most important Eastern Black Rail habitat in Louisiana, providing for an estimated 30 Eastern Black Rails, or 1–3% of the entire threatened population based on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) data, and degrade additional Eastern Black Rail habitat located around the facility.

The proposed Commonwealth LNG export terminal would be built on the west side of Calcasieu Pass at its mouth in an area of coastal Cameron Parish that has several liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals either built, planned, or proposed to be sited, which would reduce or destroy critical wildlife habitat, including that of the Eastern Black Rail. Among all LNG sites proposed in Louisiana, Audubon Delta ranks the proposed site of Commonwealth LNG as the most devastating to the Endangered Species Act, Eastern Black Rail, and migratory birds.

According to the Final Environmental Impact Statement, this project would destroy 95.9 acres of wetlands and temporarily impact 49.9 acres of wetlands. This includes critical habitat that cannot be mitigated quickly or easily, if at all.

Habitat fragmentation and conversion is a primary threat to the population viability of Eastern Black Rail, which is wetland dependent. According to the *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Species Status Assessment Report*:

Black rails require dense vegetative cover that allows movement underneath the canopy. Because birds are found in a variety of salt, brackish, and freshwater marsh habitats that can be tidally or non-tidally influenced, plant structure is considered more important than plant species composition in predicting habitat suitability, as documented by R.E. Flores and W.R. Eddleman in 1995. Vegetation height is

generally less than or equal to 1 meter in coastal habitats, but taller in occupied cattail and bulrush marshes, as noted by L.M. Davidson in 1992 and later confirmed by M.L. Legare and W. R. Eddleman in 2001 and D.R. Culver and J.M. Lemly in 2013. **However, the 2019 species status assessment noted that when shrub densities become too high, the habitat becomes less suitable for eastern black rails.**

Mitigation and avoidance recommendations are untenable to sustain Eastern Black Rail at or near this proposed location. Only one Black Rail nest has ever been found in western Gulf Coast high marsh despite thousands of field hours spent in suitable habitat by expert ornithologists. All proposed Eastern Black Rail impact mitigation plans are unrealistic, untested, and unworkable.

This facility would be one among many in coastal Cameron Parish altering or destroying avian and other wildlife habitat. This project is particularly concerning, as it would destroy dozens of acres of coastal cheniers – critical stopover sites for neotropical migratory birds.

Significant investment has been made in Cameron Parish to restore habitat that benefits residents, communities, outdoor enthusiasts, and wildlife. Developing industrial sites along the coast in this proposed area can compromise the protection of these critical habitats from being damaged by saltwater intrusion and impacted by floodwater management during storm events.

The State of Louisiana has invested \$16.4 million in restoring nearby Rabbit Island for thousands of nesting Brown Pelicans and millions of dollars in coastal restoration within ten miles of the site. Located in the southwest portion of Calcasieu Lake, Rabbit Island is Southwest Louisiana's only Brown Pelican colony. The importance of wildlife habitat restoration is made clear by the data from the first nesting season following completion of the project; while roughly 370 nests were anticipated for the 2021 season, LDWF observed approximately 6,100 nests on the island, including 1,150 Brown Pelican nests. Included in the 12 species observed nesting on Rabbit Island, 10 are listed as "species of greatest conservation need" in Louisiana's Wildlife Action Plan.

Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge, a wildlife sanctuary that sits along 26 miles of coast, has been retreating at a rate of about 70 feet per year. Projects have been implemented to protect the shoreline of this fast-eroding area. The Rockefeller Shoreline projects, three in all, represent over 5 miles of foreshore breakwaters, protecting a critical section of the Gulf shoreline that has seen some of the highest erosion rates in Louisiana.

In 2019, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) completed restoration of the Oyster Bayou marsh, with an investment of \$31 million. The project restored approximately 600 acres of salt marsh and included 2.5 miles of earthen terrace to protect the coast from further erosion. The restored marsh connects to 9 miles of beach which was restored in 2014, extending from the Calcasieu Ship Channel entrance to Holly Beach.

Other restoration projects in Cameron Parish include:

- Cameron-Creole Watershed Grand Bayou Marsh Creation: A \$12.4 million investment to create and nourish over 700 acres of degraded marsh on the eastern shore of Calcasieu Lake.

- Cameron-Creole Freshwater Introduction: The project restored the function, value, and sustainability of 22,510 acres of marsh and open water by improving hydrologic conditions in the Cameron-Creole Watershed with a total investment of \$9.4 million.
- Cameron Meadows Marsh Creation and Terracing: This \$32 million project built more than 300 acres of marsh and 2.3 miles of terraces to increase sediment deposition and reduce the impacts of wave erosion and saltwater intrusion.
- Long Point Bayou Marsh Creation: CPRA has committed \$13.7 million to fund restoration of 400 acres of marsh in Long Point Bayou south of Hackberry. The area was damaged after a 2006 rainstorm caused tank overflows at the CITGO Manufacturing Complex; over 155 miles of shoreline in residential and marsh areas were polluted, forcing closure of the Calcasieu Ship Channel, and injuring marsh habitat, birds, fish, and other aquatic life. An additional \$1.5 million will be used to create 18 acres of oyster reef via oyster cultch placement in lower Lake Calcasieu.

Additionally, CPRA's draft 2023 Coastal Master Plan includes several projects that will benefit the residents and communities of Cameron Parish. Marsh creation and hydrologic restoration projects will maintain coastal wetlands and their ecosystem services into the future. CPRA engaged with a regional workgroup which included representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, USFWS, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, police jurors from Cameron, Calcasieu, and Vermilion Parishes, the Port of Lake Charles, state universities, and oil and gas companies. The plan includes 11 marsh creation projects with a \$2.92-\$3.56 billion investment to benefit an average maximum of over 39,000 acres of marsh over the next 50 years. Additionally, two hydrologic restoration projects are proposed with an investment of \$171-\$207 million, benefitting an average maximum of over 30,000 acres.

Projects proposed in the latest master plan include:

- South Grand Chenier Marsh Creation
- Mud Lake Marsh Creation
- Cameron Meadows Marsh Creation
- East Calcasieu Lake Marsh Creation
- Calcasieu Ship Channel Marsh Creation
- West Brown Lake Marsh Creation – South
- West Sabine Refuge Marsh Creation - Central
- Mermentau Basin Hydrologic Restoration
- Cameron-Creole to the Gulf Hydrologic Restoration
- Southeast Calcasieu Lake Marsh Creation
- Little Chenier Marsh Creation
- West Brown Lake Marsh Creation – North
- West Sabine Refuge Marsh Creation

Cameron Parish is home to national wildlife refuges that offer a variety of recreational opportunities including fishing, hunting, birding, and wildlife viewing. These public lands are protected by the coastal beach and ridges that would be impacted by this project site.

The cumulative effect of several LNG projects sited or proposed in the Calcasieu Pass vicinity not only weakens overall coastal protection but it diminishes recreational opportunities. LWF remains concerned about this widening industrial footprint at the very edge of Louisiana's coastline denuding access for citizens to enjoy their natural resources.

Louisiana Wildlife Federation also commented in opposition to the air permit application for Commonwealth LNG in March 2022. The permit states that 3.5 million tons of greenhouse gases will be emitted each year, an amount that would take 4 million acres of forest to sequester. This does not reduce emissions or contribute to recognized goals of reduction of greenhouse gases.

Foremost, our opposition is to the location of the proposed site for Commonwealth LNG and the detrimental impact on a threatened species by the loss of the unique habitat in this coastal area of Cameron Parish that cannot be mitigated.

Louisiana Wildlife Federation is a statewide, nonprofit organization that represents 19 affiliate organizations and more than 8,000 members dedicated to the conservation of Louisiana's wildlife and natural resources. Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rebecca Triche". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Rebecca Triche
Executive Director