



For immediate release
March 11, 2004

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Vitter fighting for rights of hunters and sportsmen

(Washington, D.C) – U.S. Rep. David Vitter today introduced legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives to protect the rights of hunters and sportsmen on National Wildlife Refuges.

“Hunting and fishing have played an integral role in the culture and history of our country. I will fight any attempts to infringe on the rights of our sportsmen and women and will work to protect their ability to enjoy Sportsman’s Paradise now and in the future,” Vitter said.

A group called the Fund for Animals has filed court challenges to the hunting and fishing rights on 39 National Wildlife Refuges, including six in Louisiana. Vitter’s resolution, H. Con. Res. 382, would reaffirm that the intent of Congress in passing the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 was to allow hunting and fishing on public lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System and would also declare that the purpose of reserving certain lands as public lands is to make them available to the public for reasonable uses.

“The longstanding sporting rights on national refuges are at stake because of a radical legal challenge that may lead to reviews of all hunting in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The potential elimination of hunting and fishing on our National Wildlife Refuges is too important an issue to be left to judges, and my bill will make it clear that these rights are protected,” Vitter said.

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In 1997, Congress passed the Refuge Improvement Act declaring wildlife dependent recreational uses including hunting as priority uses of the NWR system. It also directed the Department of the Interior to facilitate increased opportunities for hunting on refuges.

“It is important to recognize that habitat loss, not recreational hunting, is the primary threat to waterfowl and other wildlife populations today,” said Dr. Alan Wentz, group manager for conservation programs for Ducks Unlimited. “Regulated recreational hunting is a critical management tool administered by trained professionals on refuges and elsewhere, and we applaud this action to reiterate Congress’ intent to allow refuge managers to have this tool available. Additionally, a ban on hunting would undermine an important source of funding and support for the refuge system, the hunting community, who contribute to wildlife conservation efforts through license fees, tags, stamps and excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment.”

In 1999, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced in its Annual Performance Report/Plan a long-term plan to increase public use of refuges by at least 20 percent by 2005. Since that decision, FWS has issued six rules to open hunting on 31 additional refuges and expand hunting on eight refuges. The Fund for Animals is claiming that the FWS failed to adequately analyze the environmental impacts of this decision.

Land in the NWR system has been open to hunting since the 1980s. Louisiana is home to 23 National Wildlife Refuges. The six Louisiana refuges listed in the Fund for Animals legal challenge are Cameron Prairie, Bayou Teche, Black Bayou, Cat Island, Mandalay and Catahoula.

Ducks Unlimited, Safari Club International and the U.S Sportsmen's Alliance Foundation are among the groups fighting the Fund for Animals legal challenge.