



The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership

Building Collaborative Action for Shorebird Conservation

Mr. Brian Rushforth, Chief of Staff
Office of Commercial Space Transportation
Federal Aviation Administration
brian.rushforth@faa.gov

20 January 2021

Dear Mr. Rushforth,

On behalf of the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership's Council, I am writing to express our deep concerns about the impacts of the SpaceX launch pad, debris field, contaminant layering, construction terminal, and mission expansion on wildlife, the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, and state lands at Boca Chica, Texas.

The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership (USSCP) and its Council is a collective of individuals and organizations who are expert in the long-term conservation of the Western Hemisphere's shorebirds. USSCP representatives have extensive experience in shorebird conservation and include federal agencies, state agencies and non-governmental organizations. We work collaboratively to address shorebird conservation issues and propose solutions. Accordingly, we are concerned about the considerable loss of habitat, direct mortality (take), and contamination of wetland sediments vital to migratory shorebirds and other wildlife near the SpaceX launch site at Boca Chica. Our members have been to the Boca Chica flats along State Highway 4 from Brownsville to the beach and know firsthand the value of this unique ecosystem to shorebirds and other wildlife.

Recognizing the great richness and abundance of wildlife species in the region, the Lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1979 with the expressed purpose to protect this biodiversity. This purpose aligns well with the overarching goal of the National Wildlife Refuge System — "to conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the benefit of current and future generations. By fulfilling this goal, the Refuge System can maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of each refuge with a focus on native species, as provided in 601 FW 3, and contribute to the conservation and, where

appropriate, restoration of representative ecosystems and ecological processes in the United States, as directed by the Improvement Act” (Refuge Management Part 601: National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, 1997: Division of Conservation, Planning and Policy).

At least 30 species of shorebirds have been recorded in the Boca Chica basin of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge by professional biologists and volunteer observers, which represent nearly 60% of the shorebird species found in all of North America and illustrate the biological diversity that the refuge was designated to protect. Many of the species observed on the Refuge rely on the site for winter habitat, and others depend on this unique area as a critical stopover site during migration from Central and South America to their breeding grounds in northern North America. Shorebirds from multiple flyways converge on the Boca Chica wetlands during the nonbreeding season. Red Knots and Piping Plovers, which are listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, use the site during migration and winter. The saline shorelines near the current SpaceX site provide nesting habitat for Wilson’s and Snowy Plovers, species of Greatest Conservation Concern in the U.S.

We believe strongly that the mission of the Lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge and the health of shorebirds and other wildlife dependent on the Refuge is being significantly compromised by the activities of the SpaceX testing and launching site, which is embedded on a private land in-holding surrounded by Refuge lands. We are particularly alarmed about the level of contamination anticipated from fuels, gasses, and toxic debris laid out across the Refuge. This launch-base area pollution could have long-term, ecosystem-wide impacts on all life of Boca Chica and near-shore Gulf of Mexico environments. It would have been difficult to choose a more biodiverse area surrounded by public lands accessible to state and U.S. citizens than the SpaceX site to undertake environmentally impactful activities.

We concur with statements provided by other concerned groups that the activities now proposed by SpaceX far exceed those authorized in the 2014 Record of Decision (ROD) and will have more significant impacts to wildlife and Refuge lands. There is evidence that conditions and requirements identified in the 2014 ROD and subsequent permits have not been met. SpaceX is currently exceeding the number of road closures allowed in the current ROD/permit, and more are planned. Without use of the road, Refuge staff and volunteers cannot conduct surveys and management activities, such as rescuing cold-stunned turtles. The unprecedented number of public closures has also denied the public access to state and federal lands. Road activity by SpaceX personnel and contractors has increased significantly

above what was permitted, which affects wildlife directly through road mortality and indirectly by avoidance of the road area. Lights from the SpaceX facility are on 24 hours a day and can negatively affect the behavior of sea turtles and migrating birds.

We recommend a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) be prepared to evaluate the effects on sensitive flora and fauna for SpaceX activities that were not previously identified in the 2014 ROD. For example, the development of the Starship has led to unanticipated impacts that have included explosions, debris, and brush fires, all of which impact wildlife. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should review the EIS and all documents associated with permitting. Until a rigorous EIS is completed, the FAA should halt all expansion of SpaceX's footprint and testing activities and ensure monitoring plans are being conducted and results transmitted to appropriate agencies and other stakeholders.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Catherine Hickey".

Catherine Hickey, Vice Chair
U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership Council

cc: Edward Boling, Associate Director for NEPA Compliance
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