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December 10, 2024

Martha Williams
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Williams,

I write to you with concerns regarding a recent announcement made by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to fully drain Little Grassy Lake, located in Southern Illinois' Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Like many of my constituents, I was left feeling frustrated and blindsided by FWS' lack of transparency and engagement with the local community.

Established on August 5, 1947, the Crab Orchard NWR is composed of 44,000 acres, including 4,000 acres of congressionally designated wilderness and three lake reservoirs. Little Grassy Lake has been a cornerstone of Southern Illinois communities for the last 77 years, offering opportunities for recreationalists of all interests and ages, ranging from hiking and camping to watersports and fishing. It also serves as an outdoor education center for young people, a popular location for summer and church camps, and the site for the Boy Scouts of America Pine Ridge Scout Camp.

In September 2024, FWS – in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – began conducting a dam safety modification study to evaluate alternatives for repairing the dam and to create a construction plan with benchmarks for after the study concludes. According to FWS staff, the study is estimated to be a two-year process, with repairs expected to take anywhere from five to seven years.

In response to outreach from my staff, FWS reassured the public it would continue to have access to the lake for water-based recreational activities throughout the dam safety modification study and during a portion of the dam repairs, albeit at lower lake levels. You can imagine my surprise upon seeing FWS' December 5, 2024, press release quietly announcing the lake would be completely drained. To my knowledge, there was no proactive communication with my office or the public regarding this decision.

While safety remains my top priority for individuals visiting Little Grassy Lake, there needs to be federal accountability and transparency for why the lake is being abruptly drained prior to the study's conclusion. For that reason, I request a formal briefing with you and relevant FWS staff to discuss these recent developments. Additionally, I request answers to the following questions:

- 1) Why is Little Grassy Lake being drained completely and under which authorities are FWS doing so?
- 2) What other plans were considered before determining that draining the lake was the only viable option?
- 3) What factors changed between the start of the study and now to warrant the lake being drained so abruptly? Are there immediate safety concerns for the dam's structural integrity or the condition of the valve?
- 4) Did FWS provide public notification of Little Grassy Lake being fully drained beyond the press release posted to the FWS website on December 5, 2024? If so, please provide copies of such outreach.
- 5) Have there been opportunities for public input throughout this process, as promised?
 - a. If so, please explain how those opportunities were made available.
 - b. If not, how does FWS plan to incorporate public input and when?
- 6) Did FWS conduct any environmental studies prior to this decision and what is FWS' plan for relocating the fish and wildlife that live in Little Grassy Lake?
- 7) What is the process and timeline for refilling the lake after the study and repairs conclude? What assurances can FWS make that the lake will be refilled and used again for recreational purposes?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to Lacey Bowersox, lacey.bowersox@mail.house.gov, with my staff.

Sincerely,



Mike Bost
Member of Congress