



November 12, 2019

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Executive Chamber
Capitol Building
Albany, N.Y. 12224

RE: A.6520 (Englebright)/S.5871 (Martinez)

Dear Governor Cuomo,

The Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter urges you to sign into law A.6520/S.5871, a bill that would protect habitat around Plum Island, Great Gull, and Little Gull Islands to ensure the health and safety of marine mammals and sea turtle species.

For decades, 600 of the 840 acres on Plum Island have been protected from development due to their close proximity to a high-security facility, the Plum Island Animal Disease Center. Limited human presence and interference has allowed for habitat and biodiversity to flourish on the island and along its shores. Plum Island provides habitat for numerous federally endangered and threatened species of flora and fauna, including the piping plover. The waters surrounding it provide fish for endangered roseate terns and are home to federally-listed species such as Kemps Ridley sea turtles, Atlantic hawksbill sea turtles, and Atlantic sturgeon. The island is also one of the largest seal haul-out spots in southern New England. Unfortunately, Plum Island is in danger.

The federal government has plans to decommission the research facility, move it to Kansas, and sell the island to the highest bidder. Plum Island is a scenic, historic, biological treasure that should be preserved as a natural sanctuary—not sold to the highest bidder for development. The sale of the island to a private entity would adversely affect coastal resources and would be inconsistent with several of New York's coastal policies. The General Services Administration's plan fails to comply with provisions in the Endangered Species Act, the Coastal Zone Management Act, EPA cleanup requirements, and other laws and programs designed to protect the environment. In addition to signing A.6520/S.5871 into law, we urge you to utilize New York State's authority under the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Coastal Management Program to stop the federal government from selling Plum Island.

There is unanimity among elected officials, municipalities, and conservation groups on the East End and in Suffolk County that Plum Island should be preserved. As you recall, in 2017, all 18 members of the Suffolk County Legislature wrote you a letter opposing the sale of the island. All five of Long Island's East End town supervisors and 10 village mayors presented a similar letter, also in 2017. If Plum Island were to fall out of federal ownership, the Town of Southold's zoning regulations would apply. In 2013, the Town established zoning that creates a Plum Island Conservation District on nearly 80% of the island, and a Plum Island Research District on the remaining portion to protect wildlife and allow for public access and research opportunities. This could be an ideal, comprehensive solution that safeguards this national treasure while simultaneously providing benefits to the public.

Your inclusion of Plum Island in the *2016 New York State Open Space Conservation Plan* demonstrates the importance of the island's value to the State. The Plan's goal, to "acquire 600-700 acres of the undeveloped portion of Plum Island for wildlife habitat, shoreline preservation and protection of significant cultural resources, should the federal government fail to transfer the land to the USFWS," would be a victory for natural areas, wildlife, and citizens alike.

Signing A.6520/S.5871 into law, in addition to taking further action to save Plum Island, would also be consistent with priorities included in your new, nation-leading "Revive Mother Nature" Initiative, specifically those aimed at enhancing marine life, promoting coastal resiliency, and protecting natural resources. Plum Island is part of one of the last remaining large, wild coastal areas in the highly developed and urbanized Sound region, and should be valued as such in the conservation decision making process.

Given the significant ecological and historical value of these islands, and the uncertain future of Plum Island, New York State should ensure that the islands and surrounding waters are protected and remain unexploited. A.6520/S.5871 will protect this incredibly unique habitat, and when used alongside the coastal consistency provisions of the Coastal Zone Management Act, will strengthen our State's power to prevent it from being sold to the highest bidder.

Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roger Downs". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Roger Downs
Conservation Director
Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter