



Battle for Plum Island

A FIGHT TO PROTECT THE LAND CONTINUES

By Kim Kavim

To boaters cruising east through Long Island Sound, Plum Island is known primarily as a landmark that helps with navigation. It is the last big geographic feature that skippers see between Orient Point, New York, and Fishers Island, New York, some 10 miles away, near Connecticut. Plum Island Lighthouse is there, as it has been since 1869, now recognized on the National Register of Historic Places. In fact, if you don't notice the government-run research facility on the island's western shore—and assuming you're no more special than anyone else, meaning the U.S. Department of Homeland Security won't let you dinghy over for a look around—you might even think that Plum Island is some kind of a park.

And therein lies the years-long conflict that just led four U.S. senators to reintroduce legislation trying to protect the three-mile-long island from the government's current plans.

In mid-February, the quartet of Democrats—Chris Murphy and Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, and Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand of New York—reintroduced the Plum Island Conservation Act in the U.S. Senate. They were soon followed, in early March by a bipartisan coalition of 11 members of the U.S. House of Representatives from the region. That group of lawmakers, led by Republican Rep. Lee Zeldin of New York and Democratic Rep. Joe Courtney of Connecticut, filed the

Plum Island Preservation Act of 2019 in the House. Both bills are attempts to protect Plum Island from a government sale to developers, and are part of a years-long battle that dates back to the administration of President George W. Bush.

“Plum Island is home to hundreds of species of wildlife and numerous important historical sites,” Murphy stated in a press release. “Preserving the island's rich history and natural resources is a top priority of mine. I'll continue to work with my colleagues in the Connecticut and New York delegation to prohibit the federal government from selling this treasured island to the highest bidder.”

To many people who live and cruise near this part of the Sound, Plum Island has been considered an ecological treasure since at least the mid-1900s. But the island's alternating history of development and natural rebirth actually dates much further back, to the Spanish-American War in the late 1800s. That's when some of the historical sites lawmakers now want to preserve were built.

Back then, Americans feared that Spain, with its mighty navy, was going to sail across the Atlantic Ocean and attack New York City or all the gunmakers and shipbuilders on Connecticut's coastline. The federal government built out Plum Island as a self-defense fortress. It was state-of-the-art at the time, but technology evolved fast; by the end of World War I, everyone recognized that the nature of warfare had changed. An invading navy was no longer considered a threat. By the time World War II started, the fear was rockets being launched from battleships located far offshore. “The guns at the forts could lob something maybe a couple of miles,” says Amy Folk, the town historian in

Top: Plum Island Lighthouse, built in 1869, is one historical site lawmakers want to preserve.

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Southold, New York, and one of the authors of *A World Unto Itself: The Remarkable History of Plum Island, New York*. “They took guns out and sent them to Europe to use in the wars, stuff like that. By World War II, they were saying, ‘OK, what are we going to do with these forts?’”

That’s when Plum Island began the return to nature that lawmakers are also trying to protect today. Before the military took over Plum Island in the 1800s, it was farmland used for grazing livestock. After the military left in the mid-1900s, Folk says, “it turned back into nature’s paradise.” The timing of the island’s ecological restoration was considered especially precious because the opposite was happening to the landscape all around it. At that time in American history, Manhattan’s population was expanding. Long Island’s forests and farms gave way to sprawling neighborhoods and intense suburbanization. “We became this huge outgrowth of New York City,” Folk says. “So here, we have this last little jewel box that

Top: Plum Island is home to protected birds, including the piping plover, and harbor seals.

has all of the plants and animals that used to roam Long Island.”

According to the 108-organization-strong Preserve Plum Island Coalition, the island is now home to, or a foraging spot for, more than 200 species of birds alone. They include the piping plover, which had only 790 breeding pairs left on the East Coast in the mid-1980s. Today, that number is closer to 2,000, and Plum Island is one of the places the plovers breed. Plum Island also is known for harbor seals, says Louise Harrison, the New York natural areas coordinator for Save the Sound, which leads the coalition. Plum Island’s south shore, she says, is the biggest “seal haul-out” (where seals climb out of the water and onto the rocks) in all of New York state.

Harrison says the federal legislation that New York and Connecticut senators just reintroduced aims to correct a wrong that occurred with a law that President Bush signed in 2009. At that time, the federal government wanted to make as much cash as possible from a sale of Plum Island, with the money paying to move the research facility from the island to the state of Kansas. The facility is world-renowned for its biomedical expertise in protecting livestock from such scourges as hoof-and-mouth disease. When the 2009 law was signed requiring Plum Island’s sale, Harrison says, it bypassed the regular process for dealing with land that the federal government no longer wants, and failed to take into account the island’s historical and ecological importance.

“Let’s say there’s been an Army base in your neighborhood and the Army decides it doesn’t want the base anymore,” she says. “Typically, the federal government goes through this process with a long set of rules about how to move that property to a new use. They offer it to other federal agencies. If nobody at the federal level is interested, then they go to the state that the property is in. If the state doesn’t

want it, they go to the local government, and they’ll eventually go to nonprofits. But in the case of Plum Island, legislation came through that said, ‘You have to sell the island because we need the money.’”

Between that 2009 law and today, the federal government appropriated other funds to build the new research facility in Kansas. With that project already underway, proponents of the current legislation say, there is no more need for a sale of Plum Island to generate cash. Thus, the legislation reintroduced in February would stop a sale to the highest bidder and instead allow Plum Island to be transferred, the four senators stated in a press release, “to another federal agency, such as the National Park Service, to a state or local government, or to a private steward that can commit to preserving the environmental integrity of Plum Island.”

Should the island end up in local government hands, the town of Southold, on Long Island, is trying to be ready. Right now, because the

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Top and left: The island is located between Orient Point and Fishers Island; Harrison of Save the Sound

federal government controls Plum Island, local zoning regulations don't apply there. But considering the possibility of a private-development future, Southold's lawmakers enacted zoning regulations anyway, in 2013.

"The town of Southold was very smart," Harrison says. "They knew that if the island should fall into private hands, that they should have zoning in place to make sure a developer would have to conform to the town's desires. The town wants research—they want the jobs, they want the lab to be reused—and they created the Plum Island Research District. They also want conservation and historic preservation on the parts of the island where the lab is not, so they created a Plum Island Conservation District."

The language in the local regulations, Harrison says, was intentionally left vague so creative thinking could be applied to future best uses. That's why the Preserve Plum Island Coalition is now working on a plan for what might come next if the federal legislation succeeds and stops the island's sale. The coalition's plan is scheduled to be completed by the end of this year; the next meeting to discuss ideas is on the calendar for May 22.

"If we have this plan, and we can get the U.S. government or the New York government to pay attention to it, we think our prospects for protecting Plum Island will be enhanced," Harrison says. "They need to know what's going to happen on the island. Islands need security and management. We'd like to know who's going to do research at the lab, and how that will interact, if at all, with the conservation zone. Our plan will have those specifics."

This isn't the first time various levels of government have argued about Plum Island's future. Back in the mid-1900s, when the U.S. military decided to leave its Plum Island fortress, the federal government planned to sell the island to New York's Suffolk County, with the feds pushing the hardest for conservation and preservation. "The county had promised that if they bought the island, they would use it for educational purposes, as parkland and recreation land," Folk says. "As soon as they got to contract, they started to openly consider selling it to developers, and the federal government said, 'Oh no, that's not what you promised us,' and they yanked the whole deal off the table."

Whether today's debate will end with Plum Island becoming a park where boaters can dinghy ashore for some birdwatching remains to be seen. Lawmakers who represent Long Island Sound in the U.S. Congress hope to push their reintroduced legislation through for a vote this session, ultimately landing it on the desk of President Trump. As the historical twists and turns of Plum Island's fate go, it's yet another fascinating chapter. "I wouldn't call it generations' worth of aggravation," Folk says, "but certainly, since the government got its hands on it, it's been interesting." **S**