



Conserving Land  
for People

# R E L E A S E

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## Federal Money Designated to Save Cabo Rojo Salt Flats in Puerto Rico

*San Juan, Puerto Rico:* Today, the Trust for Public Land and the Puerto Rico Conservation Foundation announced that \$4.6 million in federal funding has been made earmarked to purchase a major portion of the 1,500-acre Cabo Rojo Salt Flats as an addition to the Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge near Boquerón.

After several years of negotiations and planning efforts by the Trust for Public Land, the Puerto Rico Conservation Foundation, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, funding from two federal programs will combine to purchase the first phase of a multi-year acquisition effort. \$3.1 million has been earmarked from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), a federal fund generated from lease payments for oil and gas fields that is used to purchase critical habitat and culturally significant land for conservation. The appropriation for the Cabo Rojo Salt flats will go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to purchase the property as an addition to the existing wildlife refuge. In addition, \$1.5 million has been secured from the Wetlands Reserve Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to share in the acquisition through the purchase of a conservation easement. The NRCS together with the FWS will then work to restore the wetlands as critical habitat for shorebirds. The NRCS funding is contingent on the appropriation of the LWCF funds, which have still not been approved by the U.S. Congress.

If approved, the funds will protect approximately 1,200 acres of the 1,500 acre Cabo Rojo Salt Flats. The remaining 300 acres will remain in private ownership and likely sold for private

development unless an additional \$4.0 million can be raised by the end of 1998, according to the terms of the Trust's options with the private owners of the property.

"Public acquisition ensure's that the site's ecological integrity will be sustained, while encouraging public access for recreation," stated Chris Rogers, TPL project manager who conducted the negotiations. "We are extremely pleased that this high priority conservation project for Puerto Rico has been included on the acquisition list, and are hopeful that Congress will approve the spending bill while the opportunity to protect the coastal site remains."

"Public support for the protection of the Salt Flats has been tremendous," said Juan Ricart, President of the Puerto Rico Conservation Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving Puerto Rico's biodiversity, "On weekends thousands of visitors from around the island come here to swim, picnic, hike and experience some of the best bird watching in the Caribbean. We are hopeful that the remaining purchase funds can be identified as quickly as possible."

"Conservation of the Cabo Rojo Salt Flats has been the number one acquisition priority for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Caribbean," stated Sam Hamilton, Regional Director of the FWS. "I am really excited that we now have the means to protect this important resource." In 1988, the Service designated the area as a Resource Category #1 Site which signifies the site's ecological value, uniqueness, and irreplaceable value to wildlife and fisheries.

Juan Martinez with NRCS said, "This is the first application of the WRP to Puerto Rico. It is important that we were able to introduce the program here with success on such a critical project."

The Salt Flats have also been designated as a Critical Coastal Wildlife Area by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER). Danny Pagan, Secretary of DNER said, "Cabo Rojo represents one of our most important coastal areas and it is wonderful to know that if the funding is approved, it will be permanently protected as valuable habitat for numerous species." Each year, more than 40,000 shorebirds depend on the Salt Flats as an important stopover and wintering area during their annual migration between North and South

America. In addition, it is critical habitat to other species of concern, including the federally-listed brown pelican, peregrine falcon, roseate tern, piping plover and the yellow-shouldered blackbird. The extensive sea grass beds provide feeding habitat for the endangered West Indian manatee, and the site's beaches are nesting habitat for the threatened hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles and the endangered green sea turtle.

**The Trust for Public Land (TPL)** is a national nonprofit land conservation organization based in San Francisco dedicated to preserving land of recreational, ecological, and historical importance. TPL specializes in conservation real estate applying its expertise in negotiation, public finance and law to protect land for public use. Since its founding in 1972, TPL has protected more than 900,000 acres nationwide valued at more than \$1.189 billion. The Cabo Rojo Salt Flats is TPL's first conservation project in Puerto Rico.

**The Puerto Rico Conservation Foundation** is a nonprofit citizen's organization dedicated to the conservation of Puerto Rico's biodiversity. PRCF achieves its conservation goals through research, public education and strategic planning to protect and restore threatened landscapes, and by promoting alliances with local communities. Since its founding in 1987, PRCF has worked successfully to assist local and national conservation groups and government agencies to further protection of the island's most endangered ecosystems, including the Cabo Rojo Salt Flats.

**The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service** administers more than 500 refuges in the National Wildlife System. The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of lands and waters managed specifically for the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat and represents the most comprehensive wildlife management program in the world. Units of the system stretch across the United States from northern Alaska to the Florida Keys and include small islands in the Caribbean and South Pacific. The Service also manages National Fish Hatcheries, and provides federal leadership in habitat protection, fish and wildlife research, technical assistance and the conservation and protection of migratory birds, certain marine mammals and threatened and endangered species.

The **Natural Resources Conservation Service** administers the Wetland Reserve Program, a federal program designed to restore and protect wetlands throughout the United States that were at one time degraded by continuous agricultural use. The WRP program is often used in conjunction with land acquisition by another federal agency, to protect critical wetland resource areas that will be managed in perpetuity as conservation areas.