

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 06, 2018

The Honorable Kirstjen M. Nielsen  
Secretary  
United States Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Nielsen:

We have recently learned of the decision of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to suspend public visitation and researcher access to Plum Island, NY, thereby reversing the Department's longstanding policy of allowing public access. We write respectfully to request that you reconsider this reversal and reinstate public visitation and researcher access to Plum Island.

Until recently, the Department permitted, indeed encouraged, visitation by individuals and groups who desired to learn about the important, world-class research being conducted at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center (PIADC), and better understand the rich natural and cultural resources of the undeveloped parts of the Island, by touring the facility and visiting specific highlighted points-of-interest on the Island. The Department also permitted individuals and groups to conduct research to better understand various ecological, cultural, and historical resources of Plum Island.

According to reports, the policy reversal is "...due to current litigation over the island's future, the increasing activities related to DHS's ultimate departure and the need to ensure proprieties of the future sale."<sup>1</sup> We believe, for the reasons articulated below, the Department's stated reasons for suspending public visitation are specious and the policy to close Plum Island to access and research is counterproductive and not in the public's or the Department's best interest.

For the last two years, during the pendency of the litigation, non-profit organizations and researchers visited the island without any apparent problem. Last October, for example, lab personnel invited outside groups not associated with the litigation to assist with archeological research on the island and in December independent bird surveys were resumed by Audubon New York. These efforts have now been cancelled with no explanation as to how or why they interfered with the litigation or any federal activities on the island. We request a clear explanation as to what circumstances have changed recently to justify this abrupt policy reversal regarding visitation—which access has provided the public with the benefits of a much clearer

---

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Siford, "Plum Island group tours halted by Homeland Security," *Suffolk Times* (Mattituck, NY), June 20, 2013, <http://suffolktimes.timesreview.com/2018/06/82582/plum-island-group-tours-halted-by-homeland-security/>.

appreciation and understanding of the important research taking place at the PIADC and the ecological and cultural significance of this publicly-owned island.

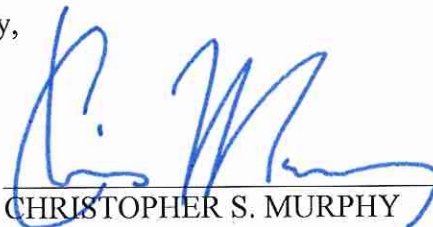
As for the proffered rationale that visitation is being suspended due to DHS's "ultimate departure and the need to ensure proprieties of the future sale"<sup>2</sup> the Department has stated that the move of the PIADC to Manhattan, Kansas is not expected to take place until 2023 at the earliest. A multimillion-dollar wastewater treatment plant is currently being built on Plum Island, underscoring the lab's plans to remain active for years to come. How could a move that is minimally five years away possibly require the suspension of visits and research today? Moreover, how does foreclosing up-to-date knowledge about the island and access by a diverse range of groups "ensure proprieties" related to the ultimate disposition of the island? Cutting off access would seem to have quite the opposite effect, allowing the government to act selectively and without transparency.

We strongly believe DHS should reconsider this change in policy. Based on the explanation provided to date there is simply no reason to discontinue this beneficial visitation program. Thank you for your attention to our concerns and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
United States Senate



CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY  
United States Senate



KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND  
United States Senate

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.