October 12, 2017

Greg Sheehan, Acting Director
United States Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Acting Director Sheehan,

I write to clarify in part my May 19, 2017 letter to your agency regarding federal land acquisition for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. The letter may have resulted in confusion about my support for the use of conservation easements by your Agency. It was not my intention to stop ongoing projects that would use conservation easements to protect important wildlife habitat and water resources in New Hampshire.

There exists a strong conservation ethic in New Hampshire. State and federal agencies have worked in partnership with non-profit organizations, municipalities and private landowners for generations to conserve important lands for their natural resource values, and to provide access for outdoor recreation such as hiking, hunting, snowmobiling and fishing.

As I wrote in my earlier letter to your agency, additional federal fee ownership is not the right method to conserve additional lands in the Conte Refuge. I have heard from multiple communities who worry about the consequences to their local economy and tax base if your agency is successful in acquiring, in fee, a large percentage of land in their towns.

While I support the right of private landowners to be able to maximize their land assets and sell to willing buyers, I also believe there needs to be more open, transparent and public discussion when your agency is considering acquiring land in fee to be part of the Conte Refuge. New Hampshire’s state agencies are willing to work with the USFWS to ensure affected communities and the public are fully aware of, and able to share their comments prior to any fee acquisition.

As an alternative to fee acquisition, I want to reiterate my support for the use of conservation easements, and would encourage your agency to use easements as the primary conservation strategy in New Hampshire. Conservation easements enable your agency to conserve important wildlife resources and habitats within the Refuge, while keeping the lands in private ownership. By doing so, communities still receive property tax revenue — and the land remains open to the public for hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Private property rights are fundamental in the Granite State. Private landownership, and the ability of willing landowners to sell their property and property interests to willing buyers, is the cornerstone of our economy. I am not in favor of limiting these fundamental property rights, but do believe that we need to perform additional due diligence and public outreach when a federal agency is seeking to acquire lands in fee.
I hope this letter clarifies my position, and encourages your agency to focus on the use of easements as the preferred conservation strategy in the Conte Refuge.

Sincerely,

Christopher T. Sununu
Governor