

Sale of Plum Island — home of swine flu testing — back up for debate

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WASHINGTON — Connecticut and New York lawmakers joined forces again on Thursday to try to prevent the sale of Plum Island, a spit of land in the Long Island Sound that's owned by the federal government.

For decades, the U.S. Department of Agriculture ran biological experiments on animal diseases on the island, working on animal illnesses like swine flu and foot-and-mouth disease, a highly contagious livestock illness.

But the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is now in charge of the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility under construction in Manhattan, Kansas, and will shut down operations at the animal lab in Plum Island and transfer them to the Midwestern facility in 2022.

Since it will soon be of no use, the federal government wants to sell the island to the highest bidder and Congress voted on legislation in 2008 that would allow the sale. But environmental groups want to keep the island - which for decades has been off limits to the public - as some sort of nature preserve that would protect the island's unique fauna and flora.

So, for the fourth time on Thursday, Reps. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, John Larson, D-1st District, and several New York lawmakers, led by Republican Rep. Lee Zeldin, introduced the "Plum Island Preservation Act of 2019," which would repeal the law mandating the sale of the island and require any further use of the island be for conservation, education and/or research purposes.

"Looking back over the last two Congresses, Representative Zeldin and I have been able to pass legislation seeking to protect Plum Island on a bipartisan basis, and at times with unanimous support," Courtney said. "This year's bill is a qualitative step forward from our past work on this issue — it enhances our efforts even further with a real plan for historic preservation, and the full repeal of the federal statute requiring the sale of the island."

Courtney also said that with the Democrats' new majority in the U.S. House "I think the prospects are very good for this bill to succeed."

But the U.S. House was not the problem in past efforts to protect Plum Island from development. Similar legislation passed in that chamber before, but was never considered in the Senate.

The island encompasses 840 acres and, although it is owned by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, it is considered part of the town of Southhold, N.Y.

One prospective purchaser of that land was President Donald Trump, who in 2013 told Newsday "it would be a really beautiful, world-class golf course."



In this Oct. 6, 2010 photo, Adrienne Esposito, left, director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, and Stella Miller, president of the Huntington-Oyster Bay Audubon Society, look over the beach from the top of an old battery, previously used for defense, on Plum Island in New York. Lawmakers in Connecticut and New York are trying to block the sale of Plum Island, the latest effort to block private development on the former germ warfare testing site in Long Island Sound that is also a habitat for over 200 bird species.



Plum Island, off the northern shore of Long Island, N.Y., is seen in an undated aerial photo. The island is home to the Plum Island Animal Disease Center, where scientists study some of the world's most infectious animal viruses. Now that the government may upgrade the laboratory, with scientists studying lethal animal diseases that endanger humans as well, officials are going out of their way to head off rumors about possible dangers from the lab. (AP Photo/USDA-ARS)



In this undated photo released by the Agricultural Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Plum Island is seen off the northern shore of New York's Long Island. The Department of Homeland Security is preparing to sell the 840-acre pork chop-shaped island off northeastern Long Island and build a new laboratory to study dangerous animal diseases in Kansas.



In this Monday, Feb. 16 photo, the Plum Island Animal Disease Center is seen on Plum Island off of the east coast of New York's Long Island. The Department of Homeland Security is preparing to sell the 840-acre pork chop-shaped island off northeastern Long Island and build a new laboratory to study dangerous animal diseases in Kansas.



People on a tour of Plum Island check out seals relaxing on the rocky coast of Plum Island in New York in 2010. The federal government wants to relocate the animal disease lab on the island to Kansas.