

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS ON HR 4953
AND S.2430: THE GREAT LAKES FISH AND WILDLIFE RESTORATION ACT

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Gilchrest, Mr. Pallone, and members of the sub committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss H.R. 4953 and S.2430, 2 bills which would reauthorize the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act.

My name is Gerry Barnhart. I am here today on behalf of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, which speaks with a unified voice on important fish and wildlife issues for the 50 State Fish and Wildlife Agencies; the directors of the eight states bordering the Great Lakes whose agencies are responsible for management of the region's fish and wildlife resources; and, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, of which I am the vice-chair. I serve as the Director of Fish, Wildlife, and Marine Resources for the State of New York.

This act provides the foundation for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's activities in the Great Lakes basin and is a model for cooperation between the federal government, the Great Lakes' states, tribes, and other partners in the Great Lakes region.

I commend Congressman Kildee and Congressman Kirk for introducing this important bill in the House and Senators DeWine, Levin, Voinovich, and Stabenow for introducing it in the Senate.

Throughout the basin, as reflected in President Bush's Executive Order for the Great Lakes, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, federal, state, and tribal governments, non-government organizations, and other interests are very excited about the opportunity to further restore the Great Lakes.

The lakes are in need of greater restoration efforts and are worth protecting. Participants in the regional collaboration identified priority areas for restoration, ranging from invasive species mitigation to habitat protection to pollution control to protecting and restoring species. Should a bill reauthorizing and improving this act be passed, it will greatly enhance the Great Lakes states' collective ability, in partnership with the tribes, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and others, to restore essential fish and wildlife resources, as well as the habitats upon which they depend, in the Great Lakes region.

In July of this year, the director's of the eight states bordering the Great Lakes whose agencies are responsible for management of the region's fish and wildlife resources submitted a letter to both houses of Congress in support of the reauthorization of the act. We believe the act will reinvigorate existing partnerships and foster new collaboration among state, tribal, and federal agencies, as well as others who have a vested interest in the Great Lakes, and provide a broad array of fish and wildlife habitat projects necessary for restoration of the Great Lakes.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has been a valued partner in coordinated fish and wildlife management in the Great Lakes region. Its contributions to management have been instrumental to the achievement of many of our resource management successes. Native species protection and restoration, disease research, law enforcement, sea lamprey control, and many other initiatives would be far less successful without the service's contributions.

To date, the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act has been the means to fund many high-priority restoration projects. These projects—just to name a few—have included such topics as:

- Restoration of lake trout and other native species;
- Walleye recruitment;
- Habitat assessment;
- The role and status of prey fish;
- Sturgeon rehabilitation;

- Lake Erie water snake recovery; and
- Wetland restoration.

This act, particularly since its 1998 reauthorization, has emphasized projects and cooperation and has made a major difference in our collective efforts to understand and restore the Great Lakes.

H.R. 4953 and S.2430: THE GREAT LAKES FISH AND WILDLIFE RESTORATION ACT

The pending bill, H.R. 4953, improves an already sound law:

- The legislation enhances the Fish and Wildlife Service's ability to make important contributions to Great Lakes restoration;
- The legislation strengthens partnerships;
- It focuses on restoration projects rather than on administration and infrastructure;
- It significantly improves our efforts to engage in ecosystem management by expanding the project review committee to include a wider representation of state and tribal experts in fisheries and wildlife, which greatly reduces the probability of expenditures on redundant or conflicting projects; and
- It authorizes special projects that have basinwide importance.

A major change in the act is the way in which it will be implemented. The bill moves the project review committee from the auspices of Council of Lake Committees (a committee operating under *A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries*) to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This change in oversight is intended to allow the service to become more engaged in the process and further integrate fish and wildlife needs.

Moreover, by expanding the review committee to include wildlife representatives from state and tribal agencies, the act goes beyond the fisheries emphasis of the 1990 and 1998 authorizations and affords us the opportunity to focus on restoration of the Great Lakes from an ecosystem perspective.

We support both the House and Senate versions of the bill; the differences between the versions are minimal and both fulfill the requirements identified by the states as priorities for restoration of the Great Lakes.

There are a few minor differences worth pointing out. The House version requests that a new comprehensive restoration study be conducted by December 16, 2009, the Senate version does not. Although we originally believed a new study was appropriate, it is not mandatory given the efforts of, and products delivered by, the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration.

One other difference is in the wording of the appropriations language. The House language clearly delineates appropriations between restoration proposals and regional projects, while the Senate version allows some flexibility in how funds may be used between the two categories. There are pros and cons to both approaches, but the Senate version does provide an opportunity that the House bill does not. It gives the Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners some ability to determine how funds will be allocated between restoration proposals and regional projects. This additional opportunity would be very helpful in successfully implementing the intent of the act, especially if full appropriations are not achieved in any given year. Therefore, we encourage the House to consider passage of the Senate version of the act, especially since the Senate has already passed S.2430.

IMPLEMENTATION

Reauthorization of the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act is a major step towards improving ecosystem management and restoring the Great Lakes.

The bill was developed with significant input from key partners in the region and provides funds for critical restoration projects, which will be identified by the states, tribes, and other stakeholders in partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

We expect that this reauthorization, with a re-invigorated emphasis by the Fish and Wildlife Service to provide additional leadership, will strengthen the cooperation we value so highly in the Great Lakes. This act, combined with a commitment to funding from Congress and the administration, will result in dramatic and successful enhancements in our

efforts to restore the fish and wildlife resources of the Great Lakes region.

I thank the committee for its consideration of and support for this important legislation, and I would be pleased to address any questions that you may have.