

**Testimony of Collin O'Mara
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**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Water, Power and
Oceans**

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 564, H.R. 1772, H.R. 2168

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Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Huffman, Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Millions of American families every year experience the Delaware River Basin, as they explore Independence Hall in Philadelphia, trace General Washington's crossing to Trenton, canoe the Water Gap, duck hunt along Delaware Bay, or watch the remarkable bird migrations across the Delaware River Basin. The Delaware River is the cradle of American democracy and a national economic engine. It is the only watershed in the country that provides drinking water to two of the top five largest metropolitan areas in the U.S., totaling more than 16 million people. It is also home to six National Wildlife Refuges, 400 miles of National Wildlife and Scenic Rivers, and contributes more than \$25 billion in economic activity, as detailed by research by the Water Resources Agency at the University of Delaware. Yet despite the Delaware Basin's nationally significant history, ecology, cultural, and economic impact, it is often considered America's forgotten waterway. H.R. 1772, The Delaware River Basin Conservation Act of 2015 (DRBCA) will begin to address this.

The Delaware River Basin should be considered among the most significant waterbodies in our nation—and mentioned in the same breath as the Chesapeake and Great Lakes. It home to world-class wildlife and wild places that host migratory birds like the red knot that stopover in Delaware Bay, the native trout that runs wild in New York streams, the river otter along the Christina Creek in downtown Wilmington, and the wetlands and forests of the Poconos. For these reasons – and the fact that we can do so more much to restore and protect the Delaware – that is why the National Wildlife Federation wholly supports the Delaware Basin Conservation Act.

The DRBCA represents what’s right with federal initiatives: encouraging collaboration among key partners, sparking innovative non-regulatory approaches, eliminating redundancies in federal, state, and local governments, and private partners, and leveraging private investment. The federal government has a role to play in creating a shared vision for the entire Delaware River Basin that all parties—from local communities and recreational users, to industrial interests and different levels of government—can buy into. We are proud of the strong bipartisan support that Congressman Carney and Congressman Gibson have generated for this legislation including 17 cosponsors from across the Delaware watershed.

The National Wildlife Federation is proud to help lead a regional coalition that pulls together hundreds of nonprofit groups and leading universities working on water issues in the Basin. Further, the unprecedented investment by the William Penn Foundation to restore the Basin is catalyzing innovative and scalable ways to improve sufficient clean water, but there’s so much more work to do. The competitive grant program will leverage private and local investment in

projects that will restore wildlife habitat, improve water quality, expand recreational opportunities, and improve resilience to storms.

It's never been more important to make strategic investments in our major water bodies—and to do so in ways that have the buy-in and support of local communities. In the past few years, we have seen the damage that can come from disasters such as the algal bloom in Toledo, Superstorm Sandy in New York and New Jersey, and the Red River in Louisiana. We are seeing similar conversations from conservationists across the nation that participate in America's Great Waters Coalition, a coalition co-chaired by NWF which also supports this legislation, works to find collaborative models for driving investments in water quality and restoration.

H.R. 1772 will provide a non-regulatory and collaborative model that will help the Delaware faces address the great challenges it faces in the years ahead from extreme storms, sea level rise, and a climbing salinity line. Across the region, we're seeing local governments invest in natural infrastructure to protect against flooding and storms. These projects are strengthening communities, improving water quality and beautifying cities, as best illustrated by Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter's Greenworks initiative and the South Wilmington wetlands restoration project. This legislation will help accelerate and enhance these investments that if made will mitigate the potential impacts and avoid potential property values impacts, declining tourism activities, and wildlife losses.

Let me end on a personal note: I've been privileged to live all over our nation and I truly believe that the Delaware Basin is nationally significant and deserves Congressional support. While I serve as President and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, I live in Wilmington, Delaware, which is in the Delaware River Basin. My three-year old daughter and I drink water from the

Bain, swim in its estuary, and fish from its river banks. Together, through the passage of H.R. 1772, we can ensure that the Delaware is no longer America's forgotten waterbody and instead is a model for watershed-wide restoration driven by local collaboration and non-regulatory means.