

HR 4953: The Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act

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House Subcommittee on Fisheries and oceans
Honorable Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman
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Chairman Gilchrest, Mr. Pallone, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the reauthorization of the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act. I also would like to thank Congressman Kildee and Congressman Kirk for introducing this important bill in the House.

My name is Donna Stine, Deputy Director of United Conservation Clubs. I am here today representing Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC). Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) is the largest and one of the oldest statewide conservation organizations in the nation, having been in existence for 69 years. The organization is a coalition of organizations, clubs, and individuals located throughout the state that are united to ensure conservation of Michigan's natural resources. Our strength lies in the size of our membership (458 clubs with over 200,000 members and 53,000 individual members) and their geographical distribution. Our membership is representative of Michigan's 2.5 million anglers, 750,000 licensed deer hunters and 500,000 small game hunters.

MUCC's conservation efforts are focused on policy and education. We have a policy staff who engages in policy advocacy at both the state and national level. We educate our members and the public through a monthly magazine, television program, leadership training program, wild animal programs for schools, a wildlife publication for elementary students, and a summer camp for kids.

As the Great Lakes define our state, they also drive our policy agenda and our members' political engagement. In the last two years, we have been involved in such issues as Great Lakes restoration, the Annex 2001, mercury reduction, a ban on phosphates in dishwasher detergents, regulating groundwater withdrawals, funding for environmental protection programs, halting the spread of invasive species, regulating metallic mineral mining, and recycling, all issues critical to the health of the Great Lakes. We also participate in the planning/management of the Great Lakes fishery. In 2005, we coordinated a national conference focused on the restoration of the Great Lakes which drew political and citizen leaders from across the county to explore means to protect and restore the Great Lakes.

Our members are passionate about their outdoor activities, and they clearly understand the link between clean air and water, wise land use management and sustainable natural resources. Our membership actively engages in the political process and votes their sport.

Michigan hunters and anglers have experienced unparalleled hunting and fishing opportunities over the last two decades. In many ways, these are the good old days for hunting and fishing in our state. With our 11,000 inland lakes and 3,000 miles of freshwater shoreline, Michigan has more total shoreline than any state except Alaska. These fresh waters provide for a phenomenal freshwater fishery. Our world class salmon fishery is only 30 years old. The first salmon were planted in the Great lakes in the mid-1960's to resolve the burgeoning alewife population. Today over 20 million pounds of fish are caught annually out the Great lakes. Over one million residents and 352,000 non-residents fish these inland oceans spending 19.3 million days on the water, annually generating \$839 million on fishing trip related expenses. The restoration of the Great Lakes sport fishery not only provides millions of days of recreation, but also has created a booming boat industry, revitalized shoreline communities, and created markets for new tackle and equipment.

Hunting is equally as great. Michigan's two scenic peninsulas provide 8 million acres of public hunting land, including 4.5 million acres managed by DNR. The DNR manages and protects 400 species of animals, including the birds and mammals that sustain our rich hunting heritage and non-game wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. Michigan leads the nation white tail deer hunting. Our wildlife, especially our waterfowl and bird species are also dependent on our Great Lakes.

While we are blessed with a world class fishery and a wealth of hunting opportunities... these opportunities are threatened. Our Great Lakes are in real crisis. A recently released paper *Prescription for Great Lakes Ecosystem Protection and Restoration (Avoiding the Tipping Point of Irreversible Changes)* published in December of 2005 stated the following:

"There is widespread agreement that the Great Lakes presently are exhibiting symptoms of extreme stress from a combination of sources that include toxic contaminants, invasive species, nutrient loading, shoreline and upland land use changes,

and hydrologic modifications. ...In large areas of the lakes, historical sources of stress have combined with new ones to reach a tipping point, the point at which ecosystem-level changes occur rapidly and unexpectedly, confounding the traditional relationship between sources of stress and the expected ecosystem response. There is compelling evidence that in many parts of the Great Lakes we are at or beyond this tipping point. Certain areas of the Great Lakes are increasingly experiencing ecosystem breakdown where intensifying levels of stress from a combination of sources have overwhelmed the natural processes that normally stabilize and buffer the system from permanent change.”

Michigan's Fishery Division Chief, Kelley Smith described management of the Great Lakes fishery as a big experiment. With the introduction of a new invasive species every 8 months, management challenges are constantly changing and the rate of change has rapidly increased.

For example, Lake Huron on the east side of our state has been called the battleground for invasive species and its fishery reflects this fact. 2005 was the worst year for salmon fishing on Lake Huron since creel surveys were first conducted in 1986. In less than a decade the salmon fishery on Lake Huron has totally crashed. Biologists have slashed salmon stocking numbers in Lake Huron because there's not enough for them to eat. Alewives, salmon's primary food source have all but disappeared from Lake Huron. The charter boat industry has substantially declined, fishing tournaments which were once important tourist draws have been cancelled and anglers are worried.

Alarming changes are also occurring in Lake Michigan. Researchers have documented a dramatic decline in abundances of Diporeia, a fresh water shrimp, in sediments of Lake Michigan; in some places they have disappeared. Diporeia is a critical component of the food web, important in the diets of many fish species. Historically it has been the dominant food source for species such as spiny and deepwater sculpin, bloater, and whitefish.

Lake Erie also is experiencing disturbing changes. Recent data indicate that since the early 1990s springtime phosphorus concentrations have increased, summertime dissolved oxygen levels in Lake Erie's central Basin have decreased and walleye numbers have begun to decline. Avian botulism now appearing in Lake Erie is leading to episodic summertime die-offs of fish and fish eating birds. Blue-green algae blooms have also returned to Lake Erie. These algae can produce toxins which at sufficient levels can be harmful to fish, wildlife and humans.

So on one hand we have this world class fishery and hunting opportunities which generates substantial economic return for the state and the nation, and on the other hand we have a looming crisis. Resolving this crisis has up to now primarily been addressed by sportsmen. While we are happy to pay for management of our sport including research, we believe that all Americans benefit from the Great Lakes, have contributed to their problems, and should share the cost of their restoration.

That is why the reauthorization of the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Act (HR 4953) is so critical to sportsmen and women and to the Great Lakes. If we are to maintain a Great Lakes sport fishery and restore the Great Lakes ecosystem, then additional research, coordination and cooperation are required --- the core objectives of HR 4953.

Since its passage in 1990, the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Act has played an important but minor part in understanding the complex ecosystem of the Great Lakes. It has funded many important projects related to native species restoration, the impact of invasive species, and habitat and fisheries management. But the \$500,000 that has been available for research is truthfully just a drop in the budget and it is vital that this amount be expanded. Research grant requests from this funding source total over \$1.5 million each year. The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration recommended \$20 million for research, restoration, and administration.

By way of comparison, Michigan spent more than \$2 million generated from hunters and anglers for research. Conversely the US Fish and Wildlife Service this year provided \$1.5 million in grants to study Rhinoceros and Tigers and \$1.3 million to study the Great Apes, all worthwhile projects but clearly not providing the economic or resource return of HR 4953. Clearly the demand and need are there for additional resources.

HR 4953 is a critical next step in restoring the fish and wildlife of the Great Lakes. Building upon the work of the President's Great Lakes Regional Collaboration it strengthens the partnerships between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State agencies and the tribes in restoring both resources and habitats. It will also strengthen the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' ability to play a critical coordination role and enhance its efforts to restore native species and habitats, provide sea lamprey control, and disease research. We support H.R. 4953's emphasis on projects rather than on administration and infrastructure. One of the aspects that we are most excited about is the inclusion of wildlife into the picture, passage of H.R. 4953 will for the first time allow for an ecosystem perspective for restoration of the Great Lakes.

The restoration of our great inland seas has been declared a national priority by President Bush and reaffirmed by over 1500 people including Great Lakes Governors, mayors, state and local government leaders, and business and

conservation advocates who participated in the Great Lakes Collaborative. HR 4953 is an important step in restoring the greatness. On behalf of the millions of sportsmen and women who treasure our Great Lakes resources, we ask that you support H.R. 4953 and retain the authorization at \$20 million as called for in the Great Lakes Collaborative.