

**TESTIMONY OF WENDI WEBER, REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE  
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE'S NORTHEAST REGION  
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
WATER, POWER AND OCEANS ON H.R. 1772, THE DELAWARE RIVER  
BASIN CONSERVATION ACT of 2015.**

**July 23, 2015**

Good morning Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Wendi Weber, Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), Northeast Region. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 1772, the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act of 2015. The Department strongly supports the goals of this legislation and looks forward to working with you to address a few outstanding concerns. We appreciate the Subcommittee's and bill sponsors' interest in conserving the important natural resources found in the Delaware River Basin.

The Service agrees with the legislation's findings that the Delaware River Basin is an important resource for people and wildlife, supplying drinking water to millions of Americans, offering countless recreational opportunities, and supporting many species of fish and wildlife. The Delaware River is the largest undammed river east of the Mississippi; it provides 330 miles on unimpeded river flow for a variety of Federal trust species. Because of that, the Service believes that it represents the best example of a wild river system in the eastern United States and, as such, its restoration can serve as a standard by which restoration efforts in other rivers systems are measured. It is critical for species like the red knot, a migratory bird species that gathers there to feed on horseshoe crab eggs during its extraordinary journey from the southern tip of South America to the tundra and Arctic Cordillera to breed.

The Service has a large presence in the Basin, serving to conserve migratory birds, anadromous fish, threatened and endangered species, and other fish and wildlife. We also help address the large demand in the area for wildlife-associated recreation and environmental education. The Service's support in this Basin is provided in many ways. The Service has 14 offices located in the 4-state area working on the Delaware River watershed, including six national wildlife refuges that protect 59,000 acres for fish and wildlife and wildlife-associated recreation. The Service carries out geographically-focused conservation of Federal trust species through five Ecological Services offices, two fisheries resource offices, and one Office of Law Enforcement Special Agent. In the Service's northeast regional office, we provide science and other tools that support the on-the-ground conservation work of our field offices. On-the-ground conservation is supported through the North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC), a science-based partnership that provides data and tools to regional partners to inform local planning and conservation projects. LCCs help our Service staff and our partners to prioritize and assess our investments in conservation, as well. The Service also offers a number of grants to partners for cooperative conservation efforts in the Delaware River Basin, including the Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Coastal, and North American Wetland Conservation Act grants.

Efforts to conserve and restore resources in the Delaware River Basin extend beyond the Service activities just described. In the Basin, a strong coalition of partners are working together to identify shared restoration goals already. These partners include Federal, state, non-governmental, academic and foundation entities. One example of collaboration in this watershed is an effort to prioritize smaller watershed clusters within the Basin and identify strategies to achieve water quality goals. Multiple partners are engaged in this effort, including the William Penn Foundation's Watershed Protection Program, the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, the Open Space Institute, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. In addition more than a dozen nongovernmental organizations throughout the watershed, including the New Jersey Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation, formed the Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed in 2012 to help protect and restore the Delaware River, its tributaries and surrounding landscapes. The Service supports and appreciates the strong coalitions already at work in the Basin, as they are critical in achieving our shared conservation objectives.

The bill would direct the Secretary of the Interior, working through the Service, to establish a Delaware River Basin restoration program, under which the Director of the Service would work with the four states and relevant partners in the Basin to identify, prioritize, and implement restoration and protection activities. Through the proposed program, the Service would work with partners to develop a basin-wide strategy, provide technical assistance toward restoration, and establish and administer a grant program to support restoration projects.

We note changes have been made to the legislation since it was introduced in the last Congress. The bill includes an authorization of \$5 million per year, which provides greater clarity than previous versions of the legislation on resources Congress intends to be available to carry out the program. However, the bill still lacks clarity in some respects. For example, it is not clear whether the Service would be able to apply any part of funds not reserved for grants to cover administrative costs. The Service would welcome the opportunity to work with the Subcommittee and bill co-sponsors to ensure that the proposed restoration program works with existing Service obligations in the region. We would also like to ensure that it is complementary to the North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative, through which we are working with partners to identify large-scale needs for scientific information that would be foundational to the success of a new restoration program and also help ensure that limited resources are used most effectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important legislation. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.