



March 21, 2024

The Honorable Cliff Bentz  
Chair, Subcommittee on Water,  
Wildlife and Fisheries  
Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1331 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jared Huffman  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Water,  
Wildlife and Fisheries  
Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1332 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Bentz and Ranking Member Huffman:

On behalf of the Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed, I write in support of H.R. 1395 — the Delaware River Basin Conservation Reauthorization Act — which will continue the non-regulatory program that provides resources for advancing protection and restoration of the ecologically and economically significant Delaware River Watershed.

The Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed unites organizations working throughout the multistate region to enhance their capacity to effectively advocate and work toward protecting and restoring the Delaware River. Our coalition represents over 185 local watershed associations, land conservancies, outdoor recreation and sporting interests, national organizations, and other stakeholder groups working throughout the 13,539 square miles of the watershed. The bill also has broad and deep support among the communities we represent. These include national organizations like, Trout Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited, along with local groups, like Friends of the Upper Delaware in upstate New York, who have completed on-the-ground projects that were funded from the existing program.

Congress clearly affirmed the importance of protecting the natural resources of the Delaware River Watershed when it passed the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act in December 2016 with bipartisan support and leadership. The legislation directed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to create and facilitate the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program, a non-regulatory effort that leverages private investment, regional partnerships, and local knowledge to protect and restore the resources of the watershed. The Service has since successfully executed six annual rounds of funding and is finalizing the seventh, through the Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund, a grant program which Congress required to be the core of the program. Projects include those that improve public access and recreational opportunities, support restoring and protecting vulnerable fish and wildlife habitat, and protect riparian, stream, and wetland habitat.

Since 2018, the Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund has awarded \$55.1 million to 195 projects, which generated \$79.2 million in match, for a total conservation impact of \$134.3 million. These projects will collectively restore over 29 miles of riparian habitat and 76 miles of stream habitat, conserve and enhance 1,339 acres of wetland habitat, restore 293 acres of floodplain, improve 29,321 acres of forest habitat and open 6,052 acres for public access. In FY23 alone, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which administers the grants, received a total of 64 proposals requesting \$26.7 million dollars. This amount reinforces a continued need to improve the health and resources of the watershed for generations to come. There's no shortage of demand, however, this often comes from larger, national, and regional organizations as opposed to smaller organizations, especially in less populated rural areas.



While historically a minimum of a one-to-one non-federal match is required for the grant program, the program is structured to increase the competitiveness of grants that exceed that threshold to leverage the maximum amount of non-federal dollars. To make the program accessible to a wider array of prospective grantees, reauthorization would allow a 90% federal investment with 10% match for small, rural, or disadvantaged communities and the Secretary may waive all match requirements at their own discretion. This would allow projects to move forward with funding that was previously out of reach for local communities that need help the most but lack the financial resources to provide matching dollars.

The Coalition believes that match relief will help to expand the program's reach to economically challenged and less populated rural areas as well as some urban areas. This shift is done in a locally driven and cost-effective way, and taps into the tremendous unmet demand to do work throughout the watershed. This type of approach is an efficient and effective way to ensure that limited resources are targeted to where they can provide maximum benefit and expand to areas where historically it hasn't had an impact locally.

The Delaware River Basin is the five-state region that drains into the Delaware River and Delaware Bay. Along with its historic importance for our nation, the river basin is a powerhouse for the economy and home to more than 8 million people. Significantly, the watershed serves as the source of clean drinking water for 14.2 million people, or roughly five percent of the U.S. population, in the densely populated Mid-Atlantic region.

The Delaware River is an historical icon that is home to nationally significant ecological and recreational assets, including one of the country's most visited units of the National Park System, the Delaware Water Gap. It also hosts more than 400 miles of National Wild and Scenic Rivers, six National Wildlife Refuges, and Delaware Bay is one of the largest systems in the National Estuary Program.

Reauthorization of this critical and well-established federal program would continue to affirm the nationally and historically significant Delaware River as a resource worth protecting. In order to fully realize the benefits of the Act and help ensure a healthy watershed for generations to come, we must provide continued support to the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program and reauthorize the Program. If passed, the program and restoration successes would continue through 2030.

We greatly appreciate your leadership and thank you for considering the reauthorization of the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act. Please contact me at [kelly.knutson@delriverwatershed.org](mailto:kelly.knutson@delriverwatershed.org) if you have any questions. The Coalition looks forward to working with you on this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Kelly Knutson  
Director, Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed