

**Statement for the Record
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

**House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries**

**Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 1395, Delaware River Basin Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2023**

March 21, 2024

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) appreciates the opportunity to submit a statement for the record on H.R. 1395, the Delaware River Basin Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2023. The Service supports H.R. 1395, which would continue a legacy of successful collaborative conservation that benefits communities and ecosystems throughout the Delaware River watershed.

The mission of the Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's efforts to achieve this mission span a wide variety of programs, including the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program (DRBRP), which is relevant to the legislation addressed today.

H.R. 1395 would reauthorize the DRBRP through 2030. This legislation would make several changes to the DRBRP's grant program, including defining the Delaware River Basin as a 5-state watershed with the addition of Maryland. Additionally, H.R. 1395 increases the federal cost share for projects that serve small, rural, and underserved communities to 90 percent. The Secretary of the Interior would also be authorized to issue a waiver for the non-federal cost share if the Secretary determines that the grant recipient is unable to pay or would experience significant financial hardship.

Background

The Service has a long history of tackling cross-cutting conservation issues. Using this expertise, the Service's Science Applications Program is bringing together partners to identify shared conservation priorities and deliver scientific information needed to achieve goals across the Delaware River watershed. Following the enactment of the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act (P.L. 114- 322) in 2016, the Service, in partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, established the DRBRP to develop a comprehensive and collaborative approach to restore and protect the Delaware River watershed. This voluntary, non-regulatory program brings partners together across the watershed in pursuit of a shared vision: restoring and protecting the watershed's natural resources for the benefit of wildlife and people. Guided by a partner-developed strategic framework, the DRBRP prioritizes conservation activities in four key areas: restoring fish and wildlife habitat, improving water quality, reducing flooding and runoff, and enhancing safe recreational access for the public.

The DRBRP's grant program, the Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund (Fund), implements these priorities by awarding matching grants to on-the-ground conservation projects. Since 2018, the Fund has awarded nearly \$55.1 million to 95 projects, which have leveraged \$79.2 million in matching funds. This amounts to a total conservation impact of \$134.3 million, a testament to the strength of our partnerships and the efficiency of the Service. The Service is appreciative of Congress's transformational investment in the Fund through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which will provide \$26 million to tackle larger projects and meet the demand for the Fund which continues to far exceed available resources through Fiscal Year 2026.

Last year, awards supported efforts to develop 13-miles of recreational access for streams in Camden, New Jersey, enhance stormwater management to wetland species and improve public safety in Delaware, build pollinator gardens with faith communities in Delaware, conserve brown and rainbow trout in New York, and implement post-dam removal creek restoration in Pennsylvania. These projects have resulted in far-reaching benefits for fish, wildlife, and people. In total, the DRBRP has restored 76 miles of streams, improved 6,052 acres of habitat with public access, and advanced the management of 29,321 acres of forest, all while creating an estimated 445 jobs for local economies.

H.R. 1395, Delaware River Basin Conservation Reauthorization Act

Building off the last six years of success, H.R. 1395 would enable continued progress toward shared conservation goals in the Delaware River watershed. The DRBRP demonstrates the power of collaborative, landscape-scale conservation in tackling 21st century conservation challenges like climate change, habitat degradation, and biodiversity loss. We appreciate the bill sponsor, co-sponsors, and Committee's continued support for this valuable program.

The addition of Maryland under H.R. 1395 would align the program with the watershed's geography. While entities from Maryland are currently eligible to apply for grants from the Fund, provided they meet all requirements, codifying Maryland's inclusion would clarify eligibility and drive increased engagement throughout the watershed.

The Service appreciates this bill's focus on ensuring equitable access to funding for small, rural, and underserved communities. The non-federal cost share requirement for the DRBRP's grant program can serve as a barrier to participation for many of the communities that would most benefit from this funding. By reducing the non-federal cost share and authorizing a waiver, the Service can support communities that lacked the resources to participate in the program previously. Increasing equity and access to these resources would ensure that the program truly serves everyone who lives, works, and recreates on the Delaware River.

The Service would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee on three recommended changes to H.R. 1395. The Service recommends removing the prohibition on the net gain of Federal employees for the administration of the DRBRP under P.L. 114-322. Additionally, the Service suggests an edit to Section 2(d) to authorize the program rather than requiring the program to be sunset upon expiration. Finally, we would welcome the opportunity to work with Congress to ensure a strong DRBRP, while maintaining the Service's flexibility and resources to address other areas of conservation priority for the Nation.

Conclusion

The Service supports H.R. 1395, which would continue a legacy of successful collaborative conservation that benefits communities and ecosystems throughout the Delaware River watershed. We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in community-based, collaborative conservation and continued support for the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program. The Service remains committed to working with partners, local communities, and private landowners to conserve habitat and species while benefiting the public with healthier and more enjoyable surroundings. We look forward to working with the sponsor and Subcommittee on this legislation.