

TESTIMONY OF D.A. (DON) YOUNG
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS
CONCERNING: THE GREAT LAKES FISH AND WILDLIFE RESTORATION ACT OF 2006
H.R. 4953 and S. 2430
SEPTEMBER 14, 2006

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Don Young. I am the Executive Vice President of Ducks Unlimited (DU). Ducks Unlimited is a non-profit wetlands conservation organization, with affiliates in Canada and Mexico. In my role as the staff leader for Ducks Unlimited, I manage our employees and provide leadership to our volunteers and members in all 50 states.

Ducks Unlimited was founded almost 70 years ago by concerned and farsighted sportsmen-conservationists. It has grown from a handful of people to an organization of over 1,000,000 supporters who now make up the largest wetlands and waterfowl conservation organization in the world. Since 1937, DU has conserved nearly 12 million acres of wildlife habitat in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. We pride ourselves on our cooperative conservation work with federal and state agencies, cities and local communities, tribes, other conservation organizations, and thousands of private landowners throughout North America in the interest of wetland conservation.

About one quarter of DU members reside in the eight Great Lakes states. We have an active presence in the region, working with a wide range of partners to protect and restore vital waterfowl habitats on private and public lands. DU and its partners have conserved tens of thousands of acres of wetlands and associated habitats in the Great Lakes watershed. The Great Lakes play a monumental role for North America's waterfowl, serving as productive nesting and breeding grounds, essential spring and fall migration rest areas, and vital wintering areas. Approximately 8 million waterfowl rely on the Great Lakes for some portion of their annual life cycle. The Great Lakes are extremely important to mallards, once of the most important species of waterfowl. Mallards that nest and migrate through the Great Lakes provide recreational opportunities to the entire eastern US. In fact, mallards produced in the Great Lakes are an important source of ducks for hunters in the mid-Atlantic and southern region of the U.S.

The Great Lakes are a high priority in DU's International Conservation Plan, developed by DU scientists from throughout North America. The area is also of international importance outlined in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, which celebrates its 20 th Anniversary this year as one of the premier conservation initiatives in the world. Many other fish and wildlife plans highlight the importance of the Great Lakes, not only to the region, but well beyond to other areas of our country and the continent. Migrant shorebirds nesting in the arctic and subarctic use the Great Lakes coastal wetlands and related habitats as resting areas on their way to South America. Neotropical migrant songbirds and raptors heavily utilize shoreline habitats in the Great Lakes as they migrate in spring and fall. In essence, the Great Lakes provide a critical link in wildlife habitats for the entire Western Hemisphere.

President Bush recognized the significance of the Great Lakes in a 2004 Executive Order whereby he commissioned the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC or Collaboration). The Collaboration led to the development of a solid blueprint to restore and protect the natural resources of the Great Lakes and includes goals and objectives for wetland habitat restoration. DU was an active partner in the development of the restoration strategy and, when the final strategy was unveiled in December 2005, DU committed to raise \$8 million dollars to go toward the wetland restoration goals of the strategy.

Sportsmen and women play a critical role in funding conservation by paying license fees and excise taxes and contributing funds to conservation organizations like DU, but government funds are needed to complement these efforts. We all share the responsibility to conserve the Great Lakes and it's important for local, state and federal government to invest in public-private partnerships to restore this great resource. DU stands ready to assist in that effort and we believe the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act (GLFWRA or Act) can help to expand and facilitate many of the existing partnerships in the Region, as well as develop new partnerships. The reauthorization of the Act will be a positive step in the Collaboration process and, with adequate funding, future projects funded through the Act will accelerate cooperative on-the-ground habitat conservation in the Great Lakes watershed.

As the GLRC restoration strategy was being developed, the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act was identified as a key component to stimulate partnerships and on-the-ground wetland conservation in the region. The Act was originally enacted in 1990 for the purpose of carrying out the Great Lakes Fishery Resources Restoration Study. In 1998, the Act was reauthorized with the intent of moving from study to action. The 1998 Act added the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan as a requirement for project proposals. This requirement is consistent with the stated goals of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) which include wetlands conservation and protection, managing and conserving migratory birds.

Since 1998, a number of research projects have been implemented that were designed to benefit the fishery resources of the Great Lakes. But few projects have been funded to specifically address the wildlife habitat goals of the Service. We believe improvements being proposed in this reauthorization will help to remedy this issue and result in a greater overall number of restoration projects that stand to benefit a diversity of habitats for fish and wildlife. The Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act will greatly enhance opportunities for the eight states to work cooperatively with their public and private conservation partners to address the entire scope of challenges facing fish and wildlife habitat in the Great Lakes region, as well as the habitat goals of the Collaboration.

As part of the Collaboration process, DU has identified several habitat conservation projects that could benefit from the Act, including projects in Wisconsin, New York, Michigan, Indiana and Ohio that could match millions of federal dollars from the Act with millions of state and private investment to achieve the ambitious wetland conservation goals of the GLRC strategy. GLFWRA projects also have the potential to effectively restore areas of grasslands, riparian areas and forested habitats in the region on both private and public lands.

DU supports the concept of regional projects in the proposed bills, and we believe the time is right for the federal and state fish and wildlife agencies to collaborate on issues that are of regional concern, such as wetland loss in multi-state watersheds, management of invasive species, overabundant species such as Canada geese and cormorants, and joint fisheries concerns, to name a few. The proposed bills also include important language related to the Service's Great Lakes Coordinator position. DU strongly supports the role of the Great Lakes Coordination Office and this particular position. We believe they can help to orchestrate a well-coordinated effort among the habitat conservation partners working in the Great Lakes.

We believe that the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act can be an important restoration and conservation tool for the region. With support from Congress and the Administration, the program has the potential to provide long-term fish and wildlife and water quality benefits to once again make the Great Lakes a world-class environment, while at the same time ensuring economic and community sustainability. The long-term health of this region and its citizens depends upon merging conservation together with industry, agriculture, and development as stated in the GLRC plan. This Act is the only federal conservation program that is specifically targeted toward habitat restoration in the region and has great potential to positively impact the resources of the Great Lakes.

Water-related outdoor recreational activities in the Great Lakes Basin are valued at \$50 billion annually. These activities include waterfowl hunting, sportfishing, boating and other outdoor activities enjoyed by both residents and visitors to the Great Lakes states. In a region that has experienced economic difficulties due to loss of manufacturing jobs, the potential for increased tourism and water-related recreation is a bright spot in the long-term economic picture for the Great Lakes.

As is often said, the Great Lakes contain 20 percent of the world's fresh water, and 90 percent of the U.S. fresh water. But the water is not very valuable if it's polluted, and significant funds are needed to make it useable. The Great Lakes region has lost approximately 60 percent of its original wetlands. As a result, nature's system of keeping our waters healthy have been essentially eliminated and degraded. Not only do these wetlands keep the Great Lakes clean and healthy, but they are the sustenance of many species of fish and wildlife. Many species that are economically and recreationally important rely on Great Lakes wetlands, and many of these species are no longer as abundant and healthy as they once were due to wetland loss and degradation.

The wetland restoration process is underway, but we need increased federal investment so that state, local and private partners can deliver Great Lakes restoration to the citizens of the Great Lakes basin. Reauthorization of the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act will bolster the fine work of ensuring the Great Lakes are a national treasure for generations to come. We anticipate that passage of the reauthorization bill would provide a much needed jumpstart to funding for the program and help to stimulate larger scale restoration efforts while generating economic activity for the region.

Reauthorization of the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act is a unique opportunity for the federal government to foster collaborative conservation targeted toward on-the-ground habitat conservation in the Great Lakes region. We appreciate your continued support of fish and wildlife habitat conservation and hope you will expedite passage of the Act so it can become law in 2006. Thank you.