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Testimony of
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U.S House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
“Examining Effects of Mismanagement of Cormorants in the Great Lakes Region”
June 11, 2018

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on cormorants in the Great Lakes Region. My name is Daniel Eichinger and I serve as the Executive Director for the Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC). MUCC is the largest, most effective state-based conservation organization in the nation. We represent hunters, anglers, trappers, and conservationists all across the state of Michigan and count over 200 affiliated organizations and over 40,000 individuals as members of MUCC.

As a grassroots based conservation organization, our members bring forward priorities for conservation action through a resolution setting process that establishes our advocacy agenda and informs the issues and manner in which those of us on our professional staff engage in them on our members' behalf.

The issues pertaining to the management of the Double Crested Cormorant (cormorants) have been the subject of numerous policy resolutions from our members and all have focused on using a variety of tools to better bring the recovered population of cormorants in the Great Lakes into balance with other important and vital wildlife and sportfish populations. As our members are outdoors people, they have witnessed firsthand the effects of cormorants on sportfish populations and have observed the denuding effect that cormorant colonies have had on important coastal resources.

To understand the overall context of the cormorant issue, it is important to understand the evolution of the sport fishery in Michigan, which, according to an economic study my organization commissioned contributes in excess of \$5 billion dollars to Michigan's economy each year. Prior to 1960, the fishery in the Great Lakes was dominated by Lake Trout and Whitefish, these species provided the foundation for the commercial fishery in Michigan. Thus, the Great Lakes were not viewed themselves as a vital component of our recreational opportunities. However due to the introduction of Sea Lamprey and Alewives, the biologic composition of the lakes changed. Lake Trout populations declined severely by virtue of predation by Sea Lamprey and Alewives disrupted much of the forage base upon which our fisheries were based. Through national efforts led by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS),

we have undertaken aggressive lamprey control, which has, over a period of decades enabled Lake Trout to recover. And, through the introduction of several strains of pacific salmonids, we have reduced the prevalence of alewives in throughout the Great Lakes. The introduction of salmon not only brought about the ecological revitalization of the Great Lakes but perhaps as significantly, repositioned the Great Lakes as a premier recreational asset that is enjoyed by millions of residents and non-residents. People connected with the lakes because of the fishing opportunities they provide, and that deep connection, that all started because of a vital sport fishery has resulted in an awakening among many, certainly within the Great Lakes Basin, but beyond as well, that this resource is not only ecologically vital, but they are in fact the economic and cultural touchpoints that identify and distinguish this region.

Today, the lakes continue to provide rich sport fishing and recreational opportunities and have been the subject of some of the most effective coordinated management and advocacy efforts that I have witnessed. Yet, it is still a system in need of careful management, national prioritization, and the application of a wide array of techniques and strategies to steward the long-term conservation of the Great Lakes and its fisheries.

Cormorants in the Great Lakes

So as to be perfectly clear about this point, no conservationist or sport angler who aspires to those worthy titles would argue for the extirpation of cormorants in Michigan. Cormorants in fact represent a remarkable conservation success story, from a species that was quite literally on the brink because of toxic pollution they have well exceeded any goal for population recovery. The question about cormorants is not binary, we need not choose between either having cormorants or not. What we hope to accomplish, is a population of cormorants that is balanced in a way that the valuable ecological services they provide are situated in balance and harmony with other vital resources, like our sport fishery.

The recovery of the cormorant, as is sometimes the case when recovering any organism, is not linear. It certainly was not for cormorants. The population recovered and grew exponentially over the course of several decades to such a point that some management control was necessary to pace that recovery and manage a population in balance with other species in the lakes. Cormorants eat fish. In fact, they eat a lot of fish every day. What they eat depends upon what is available. So, in some places cormorants favor the round Goby, an invasive species in Michigan. In other places, they favor sportfish. Primarily yellow perch, walleye, smallmouth bass, and other species. Each of these are prized sportfish. They are prized not only because of the recreational opportunities they provide but because conservation in Michigan is funded primarily through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. The dollars that have been generated by sportsmen and women in Michigan support not only the conservation and management of game and sportfish but are also providing the most substantial source of funds for non-game wildlife management as well and that includes cormorants. To generate those funds, people have to fish and they have to buy hunting and fishing licenses. In order to buy licenses, people need to have opportunities to catch fish.

Throughout Michigan and along the migratory corridors the stories my members have told about flocks of hundreds of cormorants feeding on fish are numerous and stark. Cormorants prefer small or juvenile fish, often 6 inches in size or smaller. The fact that they favor fish of that size means that they have the ability to greatly impact year on year recruitment for fish. That means that we might not see the effect of cormorant predation for a year, two years, or more as those fish that should have been aging into a size class where they would show up in a creel were gone. Cormorants specifically target fish of a size that create the continual pipeline of fish age classes that sustain our fisheries over the long term.

It is important to note that our organization and many of our partners are the most forceful and energetic supporters of science based natural resources management. Early iterations of the depredation orders that were utilized by USDA and established by the USFWS were specifically designed to flatten the exponential population growth of the cormorant. They were the subject of careful planning, and established goals for population management, monitoring, and assessment. Over the last 20 years, the various depredation orders allowing the culling of cormorants have been the subject of both Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) and Environmental Assessments (EA) which have outlined the benefits and impacts of several management options. As the committee well knows, these impact statements and assessments are an essential and immutable part of natural resources management in the United States.

In 2014, the USFWS published a rule extending the Public Resource Depredation Order (PRDO) for a period of five additional years and that action was recommended via an EA. This PRDO was challenged in court and the court vacated the order because the USFWS had not conducted an EIS, the more rigorous of the two reviews. In issuing its ruling, the court indicated that USFWS would be able to initiate an EIS within about seven months. It has now been 24 months and there has been little to no indication that USFWS is actively working on an EIS to satisfy the Court.

Michigan's sport-fishing and conservation community are supporters of the USFWS. We have partnered successfully on hundreds of conservation priorities and it is through those partnerships and partnerships like them all across the country that we can all proudly point to the recovery of America's game and sportfish species as the byproduct of that partnership. What we cannot understand is how or why the USFWS, which heretofore have been valuable and critical partners in allowing the management of cormorants to yield their leadership position at a moment when their sole action can allow the process of management to once again move forward.

While I understand that H.R 4429 is not the explicit subject of this hearing, we need to contextualize why it is necessary to move that legislation forward. If the court has vacated the PRDO because an EIS was not completed and the USFWS is inexplicably absent in moving that process forward, we have few options but to petition Congress to order the reinstatement of the PRDO to allow management to go forward. I will not speculate on the motivations behind de-emphasizing action on this issue, but I will highlight that if the USFWS is unwilling to prioritize this action, it is right and necessary that Congress should compel them to proceed.

On behalf of Michigan's sport-fishing community I sincerely appreciate and thank the committee, you Mr. Chairman, and in particular Congressman Bergman for his leadership and focus on this issue. As I conclude, let me offer again that what we are seeking is a reinstatement of the tools we need to balance these populations. We sincerely hope that the attention this issue is being given by Congress will compel the USFWS to more energetically engage in this issue and affirm the actions that they have taken over the last two decades with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, USDA, and the hundreds of conservation and sport-fishing organizations that have supported our past success in managing this population in a way that supports their recovery and ensures the long-term viability of our sport fish resources. Thank you.