

TESTIMONY OF DONALD HENNE, PROJECT LEADER, SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND COASTAL PROGRAM,  
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE  
RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS REGARDING H.R. 307, THE LONG  
ISLAND SOUND STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVE

JUNE 27, 2005

GROTON, CONNECTICUT

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Donald Henne, Project Leader for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Coastal Program in Southern New England. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Service's conservation activities on Long Island Sound and provide an update on the progress of the Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative. Because the Environmental Protection Agency is the designated lead agency in H.R. 307, I will focus my remarks on the Service's role in Long Island Sound conservation activities.

The Service's Coastal Program has a proud history with Long Island Sound. The history began in 1991 with the delivery of the Northeast Coastal Area Study to Congress. We provide leadership in analyzing and recommending several important ecological areas for the Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative, including providing regular eelgrass surveys.

In addition to providing biological expertise in identifying areas of ecological significance within the watershed, the Service's Coastal Program also shares expertise in habitat restoration, geographic information systems, and conservation grants with the community for the purposes of protecting fish and wildlife resources. For example, the Service served as a lead partner in launching the Long Island Sound Futures Fund grant program, which leveraged over one million dollars toward 29 projects across the Sound. The Service continues to work with federal, state, and private partners to conserve and restore habitats for migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, anadromous (migratory) fish and marine mammals, using our staff talents and office resources to make these essential partnerships stronger and cost effective.

One of our many effective partnerships is with the EPA's National Estuary Program. In particular, we are cooperating with EPA on its Long Island Sound Study and participate on the Study's Management Committee and on several other working groups. In addition, the Service has a liaison position in EPA's Stamford, Connecticut, office, which supports the Long Island Sound Study Program. The goal of these collective efforts is to conserve and restore natural resources in this estuary, replete with natural, recreational, historical, and commercial value.

The Long Island Sound ecosystem, as you know, is burdened by increased urbanization and commerce for millions of people. It is the site of electrical transmission and communication cable crossings and is a focus for energy generation and fuel transfer facilities. Although habitat loss and degradation are significant threats to this area, the Sound continues to produce a remarkable variety of life.

I am fortunate to work with a number of talented and dedicated conservationists in the Long Island Sound watershed. These are skilled people who tirelessly pursue opportunities to act in the face of difficult challenges. These challenges include: a long history of human impact, working across multiple jurisdictions, ongoing residential and commercial development, and the reality that doing conservation business in the Sound is expensive. Despite these challenges, the dedication and resource knowledge of these individuals are steadily advancing conservation, and significant strides are being made through active coordination and voluntary partnerships, such as the Service's interagency partnership with EPA.

The Long Island Sound Study Stewardship Initiative is intended to support and improve conservation of living resources and maintain healthy lands and waters upon which they depend. The Stewardship Initiative is another conservation tool for protecting ecologically significant areas, public access, and open spaces. The first stage of the evaluation produced a set of inventory maps of areas that may deserve focused consideration within the watershed or landscape context. These maps were the product of important ecological data and combined the judgments of noted resource professionals and input from the public. We are in the second stage of our analysis, and the partnership recently concluded a second series of public meetings in which the recommended stewardship areas to inaugurate the Initiative were presented. Public comments on these recommended sites are currently being analyzed by the Stewardship Work Group.

The data analysis confirms that coastal lands and underwater resources are part of a single ecological fabric. However, data collected in the Long Island Sound Study only contain detailed characterizations for our land-based and near-shore resources. The Stewardship Initiative has identified the need for additional data to inventory underwater resources, which are vitally important habitats to fish and wildlife species, on a separate timeline. The Service supports collaborative efforts to inventory and characterize underwater resources in Long Island Sound.

The Long Island Sound Study Stewardship Initiative complements other ongoing and planned conservation and research activities in the watershed. Such programs include: the Service's National Wildlife Refuge System; New York State's and Connecticut's open space planning; the Nature Conservancy's regional planning; and state planning under the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program. Again, the Service has and will continue to work cooperatively with EPA and other community stakeholders in our efforts to complete the process of recommending the inaugural areas under the Stewardship Initiative. This concludes my testimony for today, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.