

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

STATEMENT BY
THE HONORABLE WAYNE GILCHREST
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS,
AT THE HEARING ON H.R. 1775,
THE ESTUARY HABITAT RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP ACT
SEPT. 23, 1999.

Good morning. Today the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans will be hearing from various distinguished witnesses regarding the status of the nation's estuaries and, in particular, my bill H.R. 1775, the Estuary Habitat Restoration Partnership Act. This is a topic that has generated considerable interest this session of Congress, and it is my hope that we can come together to pass meaningful legislation to assist in the restoration of estuary habitat throughout the nation. Habitat in estuaries has been degraded or destroyed over the past 100 years with little regard for its many economic values and quality-of-life benefits. Population growth in coastal watersheds; dredging, draining, bulldozing and paving; pollution; dams; sewage discharges -- these and other impacts from human activities have led to the extensive loss and continuing destruction of estuary habitat. For example, in our coastal states, more than half (roughly 55 million acres) of wetlands have been destroyed. Specific examples include:

- In the Chesapeake Bay, 90 percent of sea grass meadows were destroyed by 1990. Over the last 30 years (1959-89), oyster harvest fell from 25 million pounds to less than one million.
- In San Francisco Bay, 95 percent of its original wetlands have been destroyed and only 300 of the original 6,000 miles of stream habitat in the central valley support spawning salmon.
- 70 percent of salt marshes along Narragansett Bay are being cut off from full tidal flow and 50 percent have been filled; and
- Louisiana estuaries continue to lose 25,000 acres annually of coastal marshes, an area roughly the size of Washington, DC;

For the most part, the loss in each estuary is an accumulation of small development projects and other impacts. The destruction cannot be blamed on one factor alone, but the cumulative effects of the destruction are surprising in extent and severity, amounting to tens of millions of acres.

We can and must coordinate Federal, state and local management efforts to protect our estuaries. We must also provide sufficient resources for estuary restoration, without which all of our planning and coordination efforts are useless. Our estuaries are sick, and planning without implementation is like a diagnosis without any treatment. If we want to bring estuaries back to health, we need to commit the time, money, and creativity necessary to restore the vital organs that make estuaries live and breathe.

H.R. 1775, the National Estuary Habitat Restoration Partnership Act, is not about a new layer of Federal bureaucracy -- it is about coordination of existing estuary restoration efforts. H.R. 1775 will complement the efforts of programs like the National Estuary Program (N-E-P) and the Coastal Wetland Conservation Grants by providing direction to Federal agencies to work together with the states, local governments, N-E-Ps, conservation groups, and others to address a most critical need -- habitat restoration.

My bill, which has 45 cosponsors, creates a national estuary habitat restoration council that will be responsible for reviewing and approving project proposals and developing a national strategy to identify restoration priorities. The council will consist of the Federal agencies that have some responsibility for estuary management -- the Army Corp of Engineers, EPA, NOAA, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Transportation. The council will also include state government representatives from six regional councils from around the country.

The six regional councils will be responsible for identifying restoration priorities for their member states and forwarding project applications that address those priorities to the national council. Each regional council is made up of the governor of each state in the region. The Federal agencies will be expected to provide technical support to these regional councils in the development of their project applications.

H.R. 1775 will engage the Federal agencies in new capacities to manage and restore this nation's estuaries. My bill gives the Army Corps of Engineers the responsibility for managing the operations of the national and regional councils, and for providing technical assistance on project development and implementation. NOAA is charged with collecting monitoring data on projects and maintaining a database of both successful and not-so-successful projects. All of the agencies are called upon to work together to coordinate their efforts and target those estuaries that are identified by the regional councils as priorities.

Despite our best efforts, the restoration of estuary habitat remains a roadblock to healthy ecosystems in many areas of the country. H.R. 1775 proposes a way to focus our efforts and to begin targeting specific, regional problems. This will be a learning experience. The agencies will need to develop new relationships and find ways to work together. With a comprehensive monitoring database, future project applicants should be able to learn from past project experiences. I see great potential for a renewed restoration effort, and I look forward to hearing the testimony on this bill.

#