

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

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### Statement

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Testimony of Mark Davis

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to Subcommittee on Fisheries, Conservation,  
Wildlife and Oceans

House Committee on Resources

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Good afternoon. On behalf of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL) and Restore America's Estuaries (RAE), I would like to thank Subcommittee Chairman (Jim) Saxton and the other members of the subcommittee for this opportunity to present testimony in strong support of HR 1775, the Estuary Habitat Restoration Partnership Act. I would also like to thank Representative Wayne Gilchrest for introducing this bill and to express our appreciation to Representatives Chris John and Billy Tauzin of Louisiana for cosponsoring it. I am privileged to be before you today.

Before I speak to the vital importance to the nation of passing HR 1775 this session, let me introduce myself. My name is Mark Davis. I am the executive director of CRCL, which has its offices in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. CRCL is a non-profit, non-partisan, environmental education and advocacy organization formed in the mid 1980s by conservationists, local governments, business, environmentalists, civic and religious organizations who shared a concern about the fate of the greatest coastal wetland and estuarine complex in the 48 contiguous United States and a commitment to the responsible stewardship of those natural treasures.

I am also a member of the board of directors of RAE, which is a coalition of eleven regional environmental organizations that all have estuary protection and restoration at the core of their missions.

CRCL and RAE members unabashedly represent a very special interest-the restoration and protection of this nation's coastal estuaries. These are resources that not only have high inherent aesthetic and "quality of life" values but also function as the heart of significant biological activity that has a direct connection to the human economy along the nation's highly populated coastline. Our work, our mission is fundamentally about good stewardship and assuring strong and vibrant coastal communities.

The geographical sweep of the RAE coalition's focus is revealed most clearly by indicating where we are located:

\* Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Delaware

- \* Long Island Sound in Connecticut and New York
- \* Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island and Massachusetts
- \* The Gulf of Maine from Cape Cod Bay to the Bay of Fundy
- \* The Hudson/Raritan estuary complex in New York and New Jersey
- \* The North Carolina coast
- \* Tampa Bay in Florida
- \* Coastal Louisiana
- \* Galveston Bay in Texas
- \* San Francisco Bay in California, and
- \* Puget Sound in Washington State.

This geographical listing, however, and the combined 250,000 members of our organizations are simply the tip of the resource for which we speak: RAE stands for a national effort to champion estuary habitat restoration and protection wherever those resources are located and whoever is working on them.

Our organizations have in some cases been working to restore and preserve our estuaries for 35 years or more. We have pledged collectively to restore at least one million acres of habitat in our nation's estuaries by the year 2010. And the need for action is great.

The vital importance and historical losses of the nation's coastal estuary resources are well documented. Estuarine habitat provides food, water pollution filtration, sediment control, shelter, resting areas and breeding areas for thousands of species of flora and fauna. Without these habitats, estuaries would be virtually dead and the vibrancy they provide to so many of our coastal communities ended.

Indeed, in Louisiana alone we are losing nearly 30 square miles of coastal wetlands-a vital component of estuarine habitat-each year. Since 1930, we have lost more than 1 million acres. These are resources that sustain one the greatest fisheries and flyways in North America. These losses have dire consequences for our environment, our economy, our way of life, and our health.

Estuaries all around the country have lost varying degrees of habitat and biological function. For example, 70 percent of the eel grass beds, and 50 percent of the salt marshes around Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island have been lost due to human activity, and the Hudson Raritan Bay area in lower New York Harbor has lost over 80 percent of its original wetlands. In the Long Island Sound more than 40 percent of the wetlands are gone. The story continues on the gulf and west coasts. Galveston Bay has lost more than 30,000 acres of marsh habitat in the last 40 years alone, and San Francisco Bay has lost 95 percent of its original marshland.

Additionally, and sadly, tens of thousands more acres of estuarine habitat continue to be destroyed each year. This habitat is the life-blood of 75 percent of all commercial fish species, and the 28 million jobs that depend on healthy, vibrant estuaries.

These are astounding statistics. They demand action. Fortunately we still have time to act. We need to start now and turn the tide on this devastating trend and actually foster the rebirth of our estuaries and their critical wetlands. And we believe HR 1775 is an essential part of any coordinated and effective plan of action.

In some cases, the losses are irretrievable and we simply need to proceed with a heightened resolve to prevent or minimize further future losses of coastal estuary habitat. I would emphasize that HR 1775 is simply one critical piece of the legislative and policy equation that must include a strong Clean Water Act and a rejuvenated National Estuary Program if we are ever to get ahead of the curve in stemming coastal resource loss and degradation.

Where HR 1775 can play a vital role is in helping provide the leadership and resources needed to restore earlier damage to estuary habitats that can be fully or partially reversed. HR 1775 will allow the nation's coastal regions to seize restoration opportunities, which must be acted on, if the biological productivity of the nation's coastline is to begin to recover.

Without spending too much time on the specifics of the legislation, let me highlight why the Gilchrest bill will serve as a national catalyst for helping restore our nation's estuary habitat. Once up and running, it is designed to:

- \* Infuse sufficient new federal resources to help our communities achieve an actual increase of one million acres of habitat by 2010.
- \* Give our communities and our organizations a real voice in the selection process because restoration projects will be driven from the community up through voluntary efforts that build effective public-private partnerships.
- \* Look to watershed based planning efforts and build on existing plans such as those we've worked to develop as part of the NEP. There's no reinventing of the wheel here, just a focused effort to make good use of good planning and get to work restoring critical estuary habitat.
- \* Build a peer review process that will assure that only the most deserving projects are selected.
- \* Help build a new level of streamlining and coordination among federal programs and agencies. The importance of accomplishing this task is highlighted by a report RAE released last year on Federal funding for habitat restoration which identified over 65 programs scattered over 7 different agencies.

RAE also supports the Gilchrest bill's choice to fund this work through an inter-agency effort led by the Army Corps of Engineers. Many RAE members have long histories of strong disagreement with the Corps. At the same time, we also recognize that in recent years the Corps has begun to try and change course and work to restore habitat in partnership with other federal agencies, state and local government and our communities.

We believe that HR 1775 will be an important part of helping lock in and advance this real and important change in the stated goals of the Corps and in the way it does business. The bill takes the Corps at its word and then builds a strong collaborative process of project selection and work that will assure that funds are used to implement real restoration in all of the nation's estuaries.

It is through these mechanisms, and the interest they've generated, that the Gilchrest bill is already helping us focus attention on restoration, focus attention on the critical need to bring new resources and dedication to the conservation of our nation's estuaries. The bill's 30 bipartisan cosponsors speak to this growing awareness of the need to act now and move this legislation. So does the strong support the bill has received from our colleagues in the environmental community, the sporting industry, business and our state and local governments.

RAE members are committed to helping you move forward with the Gilchrest bill, and get it enacted into law this year. The bill is a vital component of our efforts to bring back healthy conditions not only in Chesapeake Bay, but in Narragansett Bay, Long Island Sound, Puget Sound, and the other estuaries that make up one of this nation's most precious resources.

In south Louisiana, we all depend on our coastal wetlands and estuaries. Even if we live miles from the shore, the wetlands, bays, and estuarine lakes and bayous define who we are and how we live. We now know that we must be better stewards of these resources. Indeed, in Louisiana the Federal Government and the State of Louisiana have recognized in the recently released Coast 2050 Strategic Plan that the very survival of south Louisiana as we know it depends on our ability to embark upon a new era of habitat restoration and stewardship. We need to care of our coastal resources and invest today in their health and their very survival. We need to do the same in all of the nation's estuaries. The Gilchrest bill helps us accomplish this vital task and helps us ensure a secure and bountiful future for our country.

On behalf of all of the RAE membership, I want to applaud Rep. Gilchrest and the sponsors of this bill for their vision and leadership on this critical issue. I would also like to thank the Chairman and the members of the committee for taking the time to hear and act on this vital piece of legislation. CRCL and RAE members look forward to working with you to move the legislation forward and turn a very good bill into very good law. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. 4

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