

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**Support for H.R. 3237
Platte River Recovery Implementation
Program Extension Act**

**Written Testimony before the
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife**

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources**

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Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony in support of H.R. 3237, the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program Extension Act. I want to thank Representative Neguse for introducing H.R. 3237 and all the other representatives from Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming for cosponsoring the legislation. Their support for collaborative water solutions in the Platte River is critical and appreciated.

My name is Rich Walters and I am the Director of Conservation for The Nature Conservancy – Nebraska chapter. I represent environmental entities, which include The Whooping Crane Trust, Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited and others as well as The Nature Conservancy, on the Governance Committee of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. I have been involved with the implementation of the program for the past 12 years and have spent my entire career working on Platte River management issues. The program has been one of the nation’s most successful large-scale adaptive management programs to proactively address the needs of people and endangered species. We have seen much progress over the past 12 years, and now we need an extension to continue making progress for this important natural resource.

The Conservancy is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to the world’s toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters and oceans at unprecedented scale, providing food and water sustainably and helping make cities more sustainable. Working in all 50 states and 72 countries, we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners, including farmers, ranchers, and other landowners. In the Platte River Basin, this means working collaboratively to sustain healthy river ecosystems and the people that depend on them.

The Platte River system arises in the mountains of Colorado and Wyoming, crosses the State of Nebraska, and empties into the Missouri River on Nebraska’s eastern border. The Platte River in Nebraska provides critical habitat to the endangered or threatened whooping crane, least tern, piping plover, and pallid sturgeon, as well as habitat for numerous other species, and is a major staging area for migrating Sandhill cranes.

The Platte River and its tributaries also irrigate millions of acres of farmland, provide water to cities such as Denver, Colorado; Casper, Wyoming; and Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska, as well as numerous smaller cities and towns, and provide water for power plants that provide power throughout the western United States.

Conflicts over continued water use and development and endangered species led the basin states, the federal government, water users, and conservation groups to seek a new approach to finding solutions to these conflicts.

The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (Program) is a collaborative effort between the federal government, states, public power districts, local irrigation districts, conservation organizations and other stakeholders. The Program’s goal is to assist in the conservation and recovery of habitat for the Platte’s endangered and threatened species—and to help prevent the

need to list more species in the basin pursuant to the Endangered Species Act—using a basin-wide cooperative approach, while at the same time providing regulatory certainty to the people and industries that rely on river flows.

Since Congress authorized the Program and it began implementation in 2007, the Program has achieved eight of ten milestones identified as measures of success in the 2006 Final Platte River Recovery and Implementation Program Document. For example, the Program currently protects in excess of 12,000 acres in the Associated Habitat Reach, a ninety mile stretch of the Platte River in south-central Nebraska which includes the federal designated critical habitat for the endangered Whooping Crane, maintains an organizational structure that ensures appropriate state and federal government and stakeholder involvement in the implementation of the Program, and is one of the only species recovery programs in the country that has successfully completed a full loop of the adaptive management cycle by providing scientific learning to the Governance Committee for use in decision-making.

Since 2007, the Program focused on contributing to the recovery of its four target endangered and threatened species – the interior least tern, the piping plover, the whooping crane, and the pallid sturgeon. The Program has provided a substantial increase in nesting habitat for terns and plovers in the Associated Habitat Reach in central Nebraska. As a result, since the Program began in 2007, the number of tern breeding pairs has more than doubled from 39 to 88, and due in part of this success the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended the tern for downlisting. In addition, the number of plover breeding pairs increased from 19 to 37. During the same time period, the overall whooping crane population more than doubled from 237 to 505 birds and proportionate use of the central Platte as migratory stopover habitat increased steadily. Despite these gains, continued investment in land and water acquisition and management is needed to ensure long-term success.

The states and other interests in the basin have committed substantial resources to the success of this effort including \$30 million in cash, major land contributions, and an average of 80,000 acre-feet of water per year. In addition, each state has committed to reduce its consumptive use of water to 1997 levels and implement administrative procedures to hold water use at this limit.

All state water projects and the Colorado, Wyoming, and federal depletions plans are operational. The Program currently provides approximately 115,000 acre-feet of water toward the First Increment objective of 130,000 to 150,000 acre-feet, but additional water projects will not be operational prior to the end of the First Increment in 2019 and may require more funding than what is currently available. As such, Milestone 4 will not be achieved and this is a key impetus for seeking Extension of the First Increment for another 13 years along with additional funding.

All signatories to the Program as well as all stakeholders that are part of the Governance Committee unanimously agree that a 13-year extension of the Program and additional funding will provide the time and tools necessary to meet the water milestone, investigate the scientific underpinnings of the relationship between Program management of water and the response of the target species to those management actions, and thus provide the context for all parties to successfully negotiate a Second Increment to the Program for 2033 and beyond. H.R. 3237 is

vital to providing the authorization for the extension and to keep the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program functioning as a marquee example of a proactive, collaborative approach to providing benefits to endangered species and their habitats while allowing beneficial use of our water resources.

The Nature Conservancy is proud to be a partner in the Program and has been since its inception. TNC is a voting member on the governance committee, representing the views of environmental entities, holds positions on the water advisory and technical committees and participates in the adaptive management working group. Extending the Program is a critical piece in assuring the Platte River is managed for endangered species along with other human demands so we strongly urge your support for H.R. 3237.

We appreciate your leadership to ensure a healthy Platte River that can meet the many needs of our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.