



Ducks Unlimited Testimony on H.R. 6949

United States House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
Hearing
June 16th, 2022

Testimony provided by Nikhil “Nikki” Ghorpade, Government Affairs Manager at Ducks Unlimited, Inc., on behalf of the organization.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the subcommittee,

I want to thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on H.R. 6949, “A bill to reauthorize the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act.” My name is Nikki Ghorpade and I am the Government Affairs Manager for Ducks Unlimited. I am here to testify in support of H.R. 6949 on behalf of Ducks Unlimited as well as the Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed, a 160-member coalition that works to conserve and restore the Delaware River Watershed.

Ducks Unlimited (DU) is the world leader in wetlands and waterfowl conservation and has been since our founding in 1937. We are a science-based organization that restores, conserves, and manages wetlands and associated habitats for waterfowl and people. We have sister organizations in Canada and Mexico which also help conserve wetland habitats for waterfowl to ensure their ecological needs are met in all areas they occupy during their lifecycle. Our view is that waterfowl don’t know borders, and neither should we. We have nearly 1 million members and supporters throughout North America, many of whom are sportsmen and women, but all of whom are ardent conservationists. We have members in all 50 states and have completed projects in every one of these states. Since our founding we have impacted over 15 million acres of waterfowl habitat and continue to identify the most critical landscapes for restoration. To achieve this, our legion of conservation and research staff identify areas of the country that are both vital to waterfowl populations and are at most risk of being degraded or lost. We make these determinations through a combination of our research with academia, data generated by partners and data supported by state and federal fish and wildlife agencies. Much of this information is collected for multi-state or international compacts like the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), the 4 flyway councils and the various Joint Ventures. Through this rigorous process of data gathering and conservation planning, Ducks Unlimited has identified the Delaware River Watershed and the Delaware Bay as a critical area for waterfowl and migratory birds. The Delaware River Basin Conservation Act (DRBCA) is critical to our work, as well as the work of more than 100 other organizations based in the watershed, that benefits endemic wildlife habitat and human populations.

There is something uniquely American about the Delaware River and its watershed. In 1776, the founding fathers signed our nation’s founding document at a small state house by the banks of the river in Philadelphia. Later that year, General Washington crossed the river towards Trenton in what became a major victory of the Revolutionary war. A scene immortalized in Emmanuel Luetze’s painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” The state of Delaware, which derives its name from the River, was the first to ratify the constitution. And in 1969, on a dairy farm in the New York portion of the

watershed, a 3-day outdoor concert in Bethel ended with Jimi Hendrix playing a hauntingly beautiful rendition of the Star Spangled Banner that echoes from the past to today.

Unfortunately, much of the watershed's wild landscape as it was seen and traversed then is unrecognizable today. Since the days of our founding, the watershed has lost or seen degradation of much of the natural space that allowed the river, and its plethora of bird, animal and plant species, to thrive. Yet, the Delaware stands out as a national treasure. The watershed is one of the most populous areas of the country and supports a thriving economy, diverse communities and stunning ecosystems. More than 400 bird species and 100 fish species reside in the watershed, and some charismatic species, such as the Sturgeon, historically thrived in the area. Until the late 1800's, sturgeon were so numerous that the area was called the caviar capital of North America. The Delaware Bay hosts one of the largest spawning populations of horseshoe crabs in the world. These prehistoric organisms help sustain the yearly red knot migrations whose feeding frenzy on crab eggs is one of the great natural spectacles.

While these natural phenomena are incomparable in their innate value, the waters of the Delaware do something even more valuable and oft overlooked: they sustain the lives of nearly 15 million people. Though only 8 million people live within the watershed boundaries, the Delaware provides clean drinking water for those that live within *and* far beyond its borders. This includes the entire population of Philadelphia, Wilmington and two-thirds of New York City – and everywhere in-between. Apart from the clear benefits clean, potable water brings to the region, the river sustains a massive, diversified economy. The basin supports a \$25 billion economy that is directly tied to the watershed, including outdoor recreation like hunting, fishing and kayaking, a clean water supply, agriculture and shipping, among other activities.

Although only 9% of the watershed is made up of wetlands, those areas play an outsized role in the overall health of the landscape. The Delaware watershed provides habitat for hundreds of thousands of migrating waterfowl each year. Delaware Bay in particular stages the largest population of Atlantic Brant on the east coast. Much of the watershed also plays host to some of the most important black duck habitat in the country. The black duck guides much of our conservation planning in the region and restoring or conserving their habitat is a key objective for DU. Though most waterfowl concentrate in the lower portions of the watershed, they are reliant upon the clean water that flows all the way down from the Catskills in New York, exemplifying the interconnectedness of a river and its tributaries and demonstrates the complexity of a watershed ecosystem. This necessitates comprehensive restoration plans and programs that encompass the entirety of a watershed, not just small portions. These locales are not only important for ducks and geese, but also for key non-game species like the piping plover and the aforementioned red knot. Endemic species up and down the watershed rely on the clean water of the river –as well as the surrounding habitat in each of the basin states – to survive.

The Delaware River Basin Conservation Act and the associated grant program (Delaware River Basin Restoration Program) has been a boon to the watershed and is the preeminent program to reverse many of the damages that have impacted the area's wildlife habitat and water quality. This innovative program is non-regulatory and works with willing partners and landowners. Since the first round of funding was allocated in 2018, \$26.6 million in grant dollars were disbursed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) which generated an additional \$46 million in match funds for 123 different projects. These projects were done in all four basin states with 23 of those projects spanning multiple states and positively impacted 22,300 acres of lands and waters. 63 organizations have received grants, and even more apply each year for funding.

Since the program's inception, Ducks Unlimited and our partners have used it throughout the watershed to advance our shared conservation goals. DU never approaches projects on our own. By its nature, the DRBCA fosters partnerships that often benefit seemingly disparate stakeholders while benefiting both wildlife habitats and the communities around them. Since Ducks Unlimited started using the program, we have received 5 grants for \$1.66 million and invested an additional \$1.95 million in match with 9 different partners. This work has been done at locations as diverse as the Supawna Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in rural south Jersey to the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge in downtown Philadelphia. The latter is exceptionally unique due to its status as the first urban refuge along with being vital to migratory waterfowl. It is also the largest freshwater tidal wetland on the east coast and one of the only refuges accessible by a city bus. Though DU looked at these projects from primarily a waterfowl focus, along with our partners we assessed the tremendous value to an array of plant, bird and wildlife species as well as the value these wetland projects provide the surrounding communities.

With more than 8 million people living within the watershed, restoring the landscape is not just important for wildlife – it is also critical for people. The lands restored or protected by this program ensure the communities within the watershed have clean water to drink. With issues around the country arising around tainted water supplies and the presence of legacy chemicals, ensuring that our natural landscapes help keep our drinking water pure and safe is imperative. The Delaware River Watershed is also the front line of the fight against climate change and the associated extreme weather events. Look no further than the damage caused by Hurricane Sandy to understand the precarious position our communities are set in. Flooding caused billions of dollars in damages throughout the region and brought communities to the brink. However, one community around Cox Hall Creek near Cape May, New Jersey was mercifully able to repel most of the storm surge that ravaged their neighbors. The wetlands around them absorbed most of the flooding and left their homes intact. Natural infrastructure was able to mitigate tremendous damage and saved millions of dollars in the process. These wetlands were restored because of their value to the endemic wildlife, but ended up being most important for the people. As the watershed contains some of the lowest lying lands in the country, most communities are at high risk of the damages caused by sea level rise. Wetlands in particular have been proven to help mitigate these impacts in coastal areas and have helped these communities become more resilient in the face of climate change impacts. The DRBCA can ensure more projects like the one in Cape May can do this type of work, and each acre of land restored through the program can help mitigate the damages caused by these extreme weather events. For communities in and around the watershed, an ounce of prevention through the DRBCA is worth more than a pound of cure.

Whether you're hunting ducks on the Bay, bird watching in Philadelphia, kayaking in the rivers of New Jersey or fly fishing the headwaters in New York, the watershed is an outdoor recreation paradise. Every single outdoors pursuit relies on clean water and healthy habitats. Restoring the watershed to its original glory is not only good science and good stewardship, it's good business too. The Delaware River Basin Conservation Act is the preeminent habitat restoration and conservation program in the region. Since its inception, the DRBCA has been so successful that the supply of funding can't keep up with the demand. The proven success of the projects funded has even driven the states to provide additional resources to bring more program money to their state. Pennsylvania and New Jersey have dedicated environmental funds that can be used as match. New York went even further this year by dedicating \$300,000 a year to be used specifically to implement the DRBCA in the state. Reauthorizing and improving the program will ensure all organizations that need funding and are doing the best work will have access to funds. This, in turn, will enable local communities to direct projects to areas of greatest

need and highest likelihood of success, further enhancing the program's benefits and efficiently using program funds.

To ensure that this program continues to exist into the future and continues to fund and support this vital work for the watershed, Ducks Unlimited supports the reauthorization bill and is available to answer any questions pertaining to the program. Thank you for inviting us to address the committee and allowing us this opportunity to comment on this legislation.