



Wetlands and Habitat Protection and Restoration

Legislative Priority Fact Sheet
February 2008



Background on the Issue

The landscape and aquatic ecosystems in the Great Lakes basin have been altered due to human settlement and activities, resulting in the loss or degradation of many wildlife habitats, including fish spawning substrate and nursery areas. Great Lakes habitat loss and degradation is a pressing concern. The Great Lakes region has lost more than half of its original wetlands and 60 percent of forest lands, and the region only has small remnants of other habitat types such as savannah or prairies. These changes in habitat type and extent have contributed to the loss or severe reduction of numerous plant and animal species across the region. The 10,000 miles of Great Lakes coastline include more than 530,000 acres of coastal wetlands, sand and cobble beaches, and the largest system of freshwater dunes in the world. More than 30,000 islands scattered throughout the lakes are refuges for rare and sensitive species. These resources have substantial economic value. Current estimates indicate that boating, fishing, hunting and wildlife watching generate over \$50 billion of economic activity annually and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs. Healthy and diverse Great Lakes ecosystems are also of great value to the Tribal Nations who rely on these resources to meet their subsistence, economic, cultural, spiritual and medicinal needs.



Lake Ontario. Photo: The Nature Conservancy.

Congressional Priorities for Wetlands and Habitat Restoration

The Great Lakes Commission requests congressional support for the following priorities to continue efforts to achieve regional habitat protection and restoration goals:

- **Appropriate \$28.5 million to federal programs to continue restoration of 200,000 acres of wetlands** toward the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration goal of restoring 550,000 acres. States, local governments and NGOs would raise an additional \$28.5 million in nonfederal matching funds.
- **Fully fund the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act at \$16 million** to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for grants to states, Tribes and local governments to encourage cooperative conservation, restoration and management of fish and wildlife resources and habitat in the Great Lakes basin.
- **Pass legislation to authorize a Great Lakes Tributary River Restoration Act** to provide cost-shared grants to locally managed restoration projects in priority watersheds and appropriate \$40 million to the USFWS for this program.

Funding History and Committee Jurisdiction

Wetland and Habitat Priority	Fiscal Year Funding (millions of dollars)					
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009 Budget Request
Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act	\$1.77	\$1.77	\$1.77	\$1.77	\$1.77	No detail provided
Great Lakes Tributary River Restoration Act	---	---	---	---	---	No detail provided

Committee Jurisdiction

House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Environment and Related Agencies

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcommittee on Water Quality

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

Progress to Date

The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC) Strategy of 2005 – the outcome of a Presidential Executive Order – established habitat and wetland restoration and protection goals for the Great Lakes region. The Strategy calls for 1.1 million acres of habitat to be protected or restored: 550,000 acres of wetlands and 550,000 acres of other habitat. In 2006 several initiatives were formed to coordinate efforts to achieve those goals. Several decision support tools have been developed to identify plausible habitat restoration projects that could be quickly implemented. The initial focus of these initiatives is to protect and restore 200,000 acres of wetlands in the Great Lakes basin, toward the 550,000-acre goal established in the GLRC Strategy. Since December 2005 an estimated 65,000 acres of wetlands have been protected, improved and restored across the Great Lakes basin. Significant acreage has also been protected, improved and restored by state, local and Tribal governments, and other partners. Despite these efforts, there is currently no mechanism available to track these improvements compared to losses.

The following are important federal programs for restoring and protecting fish, wildlife and habitat in the Great Lakes:

- **Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act (USFWS):** This program provides competitive grants to states, Tribes and other entities for the conservation, restoration and management of fish and wildlife resources and their habitat in the Great Lakes basin. The program has been severely under-funded, receiving only \$1.77 million annually. In 2006, up to \$16 million annually was authorized under the Act.
- **Great Lakes Coastal Program (USFWS):** This program maintains ecosystem diversity, functions and productivity; promotes self-sustaining populations of native species; and provides for ecologically sound levels of public use and economic benefits. The program has restored or enhanced 8,144 acres and 109 miles of riparian and in-stream habitat; removed eight fish passage barriers; and funded multiple education, invasive species and research partnerships.
- **Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (USFWS):** This program has restored more than 168 miles of Great Lakes tributary streams and 10,000 acres of grasslands and wetlands that provide essential habitats for migratory birds.
- **National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program (USFWS):** This program has provided \$183 million to 25 coastal states and territories to acquire, protect and restore more than 250,000 acres of coastal wetland ecosystems.
- **Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (NOAA):** This program has protected more than 20,000 acres of coastal and estuarine lands through funds provided to state and local governments.
- **Great Lakes Habitat Initiative (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers):** This initiative is identifying site-specific actions that can be implemented under existing programs to protect and restore wetlands and aquatic habitat in the Great Lakes region. This will bridge the gap between regional needs identified in the GLRC Strategy and the programs that provide funding for “on-the-ground” actions.

Benefits to the Great Lakes Region

Restoring and protecting wetlands and habitat is a vital goal for the Great Lakes region. Natural habitats and native fish and wildlife communities play a critical role in maintaining ecosystem health and function, and contribute to the social and economic vitality of both the region and the nation. Nearshore and open waters provide drinking water for municipalities and habitat for fish, aquatic life and waterfowl. Thousands of tributaries transport sediments, nutrients and organic material throughout the watershed. Inland lakes and wetlands support diverse fish and wildlife resources and are important reservoirs for water. The full array of habitat types is vital for sustaining valuable Great Lakes species, particularly those targeted for restoration, such as trumpeter swans and lake trout. Human health and prosperity, as well as the sustainability and biodiversity of Great Lakes wildlife, fish and plant species and their habitats, are dependent on the health of the entire ecosystem.

Links for More Information

Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Grants Program: www.fws.gov/midwest/Fisheries/glfwra-grants.html

Great Lakes Coastal Program: www.fws.gov/midwest/greatlakes/glcoastal.htm

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program: <http://ecos.fws.gov/partners>

National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program: www.fws.gov/coastal/CoastalGrants

Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program: www.coastalmanagement.noaa.gov/land/welcome.html

Great Lakes Habitat Initiative: www.glhi.org