



Restoring and Protecting Valuable Fish and Wildlife Resources

The loss and degradation of habitat in the Great Lakes region is an urgent concern. Terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems have been significantly altered due to human settlement, farming, development and other activities, resulting in the loss or degradation of many fish and wildlife habitats. The Great Lakes region has lost more than half of its original wetlands and 60 percent of its forest, and retains only small remnants of other habitat types such as savannah or prairies. These changes in habitat type and extent have contributed to the loss of numerous plant and animal species across the region resulting in decreased ecosystem function and resiliency. The impact of habitat loss on fish and wildlife populations has long been recognized; however, the extent to which healthy ecosystems contribute to the economic prosperity and quality of life in the Great Lakes has only recently been acknowledged. The Great Lakes coastline spans 10,000 miles and includes 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. Boating, fishing, hunting and wildlife watching in the Great Lakes region yield over \$50 billion of economic activity annually and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs. Restoring and protecting healthy and diverse Great Lakes ecosystems is critical for fish and wildlife resources and for the people of the region, now and in the future.



Pintail ducks in flight, © Ducks Unlimited.

Request: To address the ongoing threat of habitat loss and to conserve and enhance valuable fish and wildlife resources, the Great Lakes Commission asks Congress to maintain funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative at the 2010 level of \$475 million.

Action under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) strategically targets urgent problems facing the Great Lakes in five key areas, including habitat and wildlife protection and restoration. The GLRI provides funding for a number of critical programs, including the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act, which funds U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service operations and fish and wildlife restoration projects, and the Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration program, through which the Army Corps of Engineers implements on-the-ground habitat restoration in the Great Lakes. The GLRI also provides funding to support fish and wildlife restoration in high priority areas of the Great Lakes, including Areas of Concern. The GLRI is guided by a five-year action plan that establishes outcome-oriented performance goals and criteria for measuring progress. The specific objectives for restoring and protecting fish and wildlife resources include:

- Reopening 3,000 miles of Great Lakes rivers and tributaries and removing 500 barriers to fish passage;
- Stabilizing or improving populations of 79 percent of the region's federally-listed threatened and endangered species;
- Ensuring that 57 percent of the region's native, non-threatened species are self-sustaining;
- Protecting, restoring and enhancing 125,000 acres of wetlands, associated uplands and coastal habitats;
- Collecting data on the overall health of 2,000 coastal wetlands and 500 critical spawning areas; and
- Removing 34 habitat-related Beneficial Use Impairments in Areas of Concern.

Support for Core Federal Programs

In addition to the GLRI, the Great Lakes Commission urges Congress to support base funding for the following core programs that support fish and wildlife restoration and protection:

- **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act** that provides critical support for restoration and enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat.
- **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program** that provides engineering, planning and construction support to remove barriers to fish passage and restore ecosystem functions.

Progress to Date

Restoring critical fish and wildlife habitat: The Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act provides competitive grants to states, tribes, nonprofit organizations and other entities for the conservation, restoration and management of fish and wildlife resources and their habitat in the Great Lakes basin. From 1998-2009, \$5.6 million was awarded to implement 97 restoration projects. These projects have contributed to a range of regional priorities from lake sturgeon rehabilitation to wetlands restoration. Despite a growing demand for funds, the program has been consistently under-funded. In 2006 the funding authority for this program was increased to \$16 million, but on average, only \$1.77 million has been provided to the program annually. In 2009 more than \$4 million was requested for projects, far exceeding the \$590,000 that was available. An increased emphasis on habitat conservation in the Great Lakes coupled with growing demand has caused program needs to continually surpass funding levels. In FY 2010 the GLRI provided an unprecedented \$8 million for the Act. In response, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received 167 proposals requesting \$44 million dollars – nearly six times the amount available.

Advancing fishery and ecosystem restoration: The Great Lakes Fishery and Ecosystem Restoration Program is administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and provides non-federal partners with planning, engineering and construction support in the development of restoration projects. The program has been authorized at \$100 million, but has been woefully underfunded, with just \$2.28 million awarded from FY02-FY09. Demand for the program has consistently exceeded funding. For FY 2010, \$2.4 million in base appropriations for the program was supplemented by an additional \$7.2 million through the GLRI. Currently, planning and design are proceeding on 20 restoration projects, with five projects scheduled for construction in 2010. Projects implemented under the program are critical for restoring fish and wildlife and removing habitat-related beneficial use impairments in the Areas of Concern.

Economic and Environmental Benefits

Restoring and protecting wetlands and habitat is vital 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. Coastal wetlands, river and tributaries not only provide habitat for fish and wildlife, but also 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 listed as threatened or endangered. The Great Lakes also provide significant economic benefits for the region. In the Great Lakes states, more than 37 million people participate in fishing, hunting, wildlife watching and boating and generate \$50 billion annually. Human health and prosperity – as well as the sustainability and diversity of Great Lakes wildlife, fish and plant species and their habitats – are dependent on the health of the entire ecosystem.

More Information

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative: www.greatlakesrestoration.us

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

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-Great Lakes and Ohio River Division: www.lrd.usace.army.mil

Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Habitat/Species Web Tools: www.gis.glin.net/habitat