

Congresswoman Candice Miller
Lake St. Clair: Many Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

*Transcript of remarks made via video statement
at the March 19, 2008 Lake St. Clair Conference
MacRay Harbor
Harrison Township, MI*

Hello, I'm Congresswoman Candice Miller and thank you all for being here today at this 4th Binational Conference on Lake St. Clair. I wish I could be with you in person to discuss the important issues facing Lake St. Clair. Regrettably, some scheduling conflicts have prevented that from happening, so I appreciate the opportunity to address you all through this medium.

I want to thank the Great Lakes Commission for putting this conference together and all of you for participating. As we all know, there are literally hundreds of players in Great Lakes restoration, and I want to thank all of you for your efforts to improve Lake St. Clair. Working together and harnessing our resources is crucial to making a positive impact and all of you should be commended for your dedication and your cooperation.

The Great Lakes in general and Lake St. Clair in particular are so important to Southeast Michigan and to me personally. As someone who has lived on Lake St. Clair for all my life, I have a deep appreciation for its beauty and its importance to our community. In fact, working to promote and protect the Great Lakes is one of the primary reasons I ran for Congress back in 2002.

And one of my biggest accomplishments in that time stems from the \$1 million I was able to secure to establish the Macomb- St. Clair Drinking Water Monitoring Program back in 2004. Before this program was launched, we had little information on chemical spills into the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair, other than what the officials on the Canadian side disclosed to us. We were forced to rely on information that was often incomplete and too late to be actionable. Let anyone think that these were rare occurrences, we know there were over 1,000 chemical spills from Chemical Valley into the St. Clair River over the years. And many of those chemicals may have been sucked into the water intakes that feed our drinking water systems in Southeast Michigan.

But all this has changed in recent years. Macomb County, working with their counterparts in St. Clair County, placed real-time monitors in the St. Clair River to detect hazardous chemicals in the water. When these chemicals are detected, water plant operators are warned about them, before they reach the drinking water intakes. The operators can then shut off certain intakes until the water quality has improved to an acceptable level. And guess what happened? Right around the time this system began operations, the number of spills into the St. Clair River began to decline.

Water quality monitoring is an important part of efforts to protect Lake St. Clair and we should work together to take full advantage of this technology in Southeast Michigan. I hope your

discussions today will explore this issue and what further benefits we can achieve through real time monitoring of our water.

Of course, water quality is not the only challenge facing Lake St. Clair. There are many fronts that we have to engage. We are dealing with numerous invasive species – including phragmites – which are taking over the Lake and our shores. We are still confronting problems with illicit sewer discharges and overflows which put untreated pollutants into our water. And we need to restore the habitats which have been damaged by years of pollution and neglect.

So I was extremely pleased that last November Congress enacted the Water Resources Development Act. This is legislation we have been fighting for since I got elected to Congress, so it was long overdue. The reason this legislation is so important to us is that it authorized up to \$20 million to implement the recommendations of the Lake St. Clair Management Plan.

This authorization provides a great opportunity for us to perform some significant projects which will be very beneficial to Lake St. Clair. This of course is subject to subsequent appropriations, and I pledge to work to secure as much funding as possible so that this very important work can proceed.

Another noteworthy event is a recent \$380,000 grant that was awarded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife to deal with phragmites in and around Lake St. Clair. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, SEMCOG, the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, and Harrison Township will be restoring over 800 acres of vital wetlands habitat. This funding is just a small step to help deal with these reeds that have just taken over our shores and are causing tremendous problems, and it provides a wonderful illustration of cooperation among various governmental and private entities.

One other issue of concern is the algal blooms which we have recently seen starting to flare up in Lake St. Clair. These blooms negatively impact fisheries, boating, tourism, and property values. The blooms may also produce toxins which can be fatal to humans in certain cases, and are causing botulism which is creating a tremendous number of bird deaths, particularly in the Lake Michigan area. In the water, these blooms can produce “dead zones” resulting in the demise of aquatic life. These blooms are currently having a significant impact on Saginaw Bay and now we are seeing them in Lake St. Clair.

It seems that a confluence of events has occurred to allow these algal blooms to flourish. We have low lake levels which is creating warmer water and allowing sunlight to penetrate to the bottom of the Lake. Zebra mussels which actually create very clear water have exacerbated this affect. An abundant supply of nutrients- such as phosphorus – creates the perfect conditions for these blooms to flourish. One of the key ways to prevent algal blooms is to reduce phosphorus pollution.

Phosphorus pollution can come from many different sources like wastewater treatment plants, agricultural waste and runoff, and more common products like automatic dishwash detergent and over-application of residential fertilizer. States like Minnesota and Florida have already taken action on measures to reduce phosphorus pollution and I believe Michigan should seriously

examine whether they should do the same. Municipalities across Michigan are already doing this on their own initiative.

While we have made many accomplishments over the years, there is still much to be done. I trust that your discussions will be fruitful and provide a road map moving us forward. Thank you all so much for being here, and I regret not being able to be there with you. I look forward to working with all of you in the future to preserve, improve, and restore Lake St. Clair – the heart of the Great Lakes.