



**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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PRESIDENT AND CEO, RESTORE AMERICA'S ESTUARIES**

**LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT HEARING BEFORE THE
SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND WILDLIFE**

**Collaborative Solutions to Wildlife and Habitat Management
April 27, 2010**

Good morning Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Crapo, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Jeff Benoit, President and CEO of Restore America's Estuaries. I am pleased to be here today to discuss Restore America's Estuaries' comments regarding coastal and estuarine protection and restoration through our collaboration and partnership with the USFWS Coastal Program (CP). We believe that the CP is one of the vital programs woven into the fabric of working partnerships needed to restore and maintain the water quality and ecological integrity of our nation's coasts and estuaries. Most of our accomplishments at Restore America's Estuaries are due to working in partnership with government, non-profit, and for-profit entities. We are proud to consider the CP as one of our leading Federal partners.

We strongly urge the authorization of this program, but before I present our full set of recommendations, I would like to provide you with a little background about Restore America's Estuaries and discuss several issues of interest to our organization.

RESTORE AMERICA'S ESTUARIES

Restore America's Estuaries has been working since 1995 to restore our nation's greatest estuaries. Our mission is to preserve the nation's network of estuaries by protecting and restoring the lands and waters essential to the richness and diversity of coastal life. Restore America's Estuaries is a national alliance of 11 community-based organizations that protect and restore coastal and estuarine habitat. Our 11 member organizations include: American Littoral Society, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, Save the Sound—a program of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment, Conservation Law Foundation, Galveston Bay Foundation, North Carolina Coastal Federation, People For Puget Sound, Save The Bay—San Francisco, Save the Bay—Narragansett Bay, and Tampa Bay Watch. Collectively, we have over 250,000 members nationwide.

Restore America's Estuaries is results-oriented. We join with government agencies, corporations, civic organizations, scientists, and local volunteers to conduct restoration projects with real impacts. Since its creation, Restore America's Estuaries and its 11 member organizations have:

- Invested about \$36 million in local restoration projects;
- Restored more than 56,000 acres of estuarine habitat;

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- Built more than 300 oyster reefs and planted over 2.6 million oysters;
- Mobilized more than 250,000 volunteers, including more than 80,000 young people in coastal restoration and education activities each year; and
- Convened the largest biennial national conference for the coastal restoration community.

At the national level, Restore America’s Estuaries has been a leader in bringing all sectors of the restoration community together to advance the knowledge, science, policies, and best practices in coastal and estuarine habitat restoration. Restore America’s Estuaries engaged in a 2-year initiative to create a multi-sector consensus document, *A National Strategy to Restore Coastal and Estuarine Habitat*, which outlines the objectives and methods for reaching the goal of restoring one million acres of our nation’s coastal and estuarine habitats. In a previous effort, we worked closely with the Coastal and Estuarine Research Federation to build a consensus framework for habitat restoration through a collaborative process between scientists and field practitioners to define scientifically sound and technically feasible principles of estuarine habitat restoration. These principles are delineated in the publication, *Principles of Estuarine Habitat Restoration*.

Recently we have convened two Blue Ribbon Panels of Experts that are helping to advance the pace and scale of coastal habitat restoration. One panel is investigating requirements for establishing nationally recognized carbon offset protocols for carbon sequestration through coastal wetlands restoration. The second panel is considering methodologies for quantifying the economic benefits associated with coastal habitat restoration.

IMPORTANCE OF ESTUARIES

Estuaries—where freshwater from a river mixes with saltwater from the ocean—are essential both ecologically and economically. Estuaries are among the most biologically productive, economically valuable, aesthetic, and densely populated places on earth.

Ecological

Some of the invaluable ecological services they offer include: providing vital nursery habitat for two-thirds of the commercial shellfish and finfish populations and habitat for nesting and foraging coastal birds; stabilizing shorelines and buffering against erosion; and providing flood control. In addition, they provide opportunities for people to recreate and to appreciate and learn about the natural environment. We would like to submit for the record a recent RAE publication, *Hope For Coastal Habitats: People, Partnerships & Projects Making A Difference*, which profiles people, organizations, and projects that have drastically improved ecological services through habitat restoration in watersheds across the United States.

Economic

Restore America’s Estuaries convened a panel of internationally renowned experts to help us understand the economic value of coastal and estuary resources. These authors were asked to research and summarize our knowledge of coastal economic value. We would like to submit the Executive Summary of this report, *The Economic and Market Value of Coasts and Estuaries: What’s at Stake*, for the record.

Their findings were astonishing—far beyond commercial fishing and tourism, healthy coasts and estuaries are essential for protecting more than \$800 billion of trade each year, tens of billions of dollars in recreational opportunities annually, and more than 45 percent of the nation’s petroleum refining capacity. Through this research, we found that with only 13 percent of the land area of the continental U.S., estuary regions of the nation comprise a disproportionate share of the nation’s economy, with 43 percent of the population, 40 percent of the employment, and 49 percent of output. It is clear that much of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) is generated in these narrow ribbons along our nation’s coasts. In fact, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy found that over half of the nation’s GDP (\$4.5 trillion in 2000) is generated in coastal counties and adjacent ocean waters.

Responding to Climate Change

Healthy estuaries help counter climate change by capturing carbon from the atmosphere and providing natural flood protection. Scientists have found that tidal salt marshes are particularly effective in helping to counter climate change, and recommend tidal salt marsh restoration as an important strategy to capture and hold carbon from the air. According to scientists, every acre of restored, healthy salt marsh captures and converts at least 870 kilograms of carbon dioxide into plant material annually—equivalent to the greenhouse gas emissions from driving 2,280 miles.

Coastal habitats will also play an important role in adapting to climate change, particularly sea level rise. Restored tidal salt marshes provide a natural buffer against erosion and reduce the need to build seawalls to protect developed shoreline areas against sea level rise. Coastal wetlands also provide natural flood control, and help shield communities from ever-stronger storm surges as a result of climate change.

THREATS TO ESTUARIES

Estuaries and their associated natural resources and important ecosystem services are in a perilous state due to an increasing level of stress. The coast is the fastest growing region in the country, with the coastal zone losing land to development at a pace faster than the rest of the country. This affects the quality of coastal watersheds and, as a result, the health of estuaries and coasts. These valuable coastal areas are threatened by coastal sprawl, which seriously degrades coastal water quality, reduces access to coastal waters, mars the aesthetic beauty, increases flood control costs, eliminates recreation opportunities, and alters estuaries.

In addition to physical impacts (e.g., wetland loss, shoreline armoring, and sea-level rise) to these ecosystems, nutrient and other chemical pollution (e.g., pharmaceuticals and personal care products), invasive species, and over-harvesting of resources are major causes of declines in the productivity and health of these systems.

Estuaries around the country have lost varying degrees of habitat and biological function. For example, between the 1950s and the 1990s, the Galveston Bay system experienced a net loss of nearly 35,000 acres of its wetlands due to a variety of human and natural causes. In addition, 70 percent of the eel grass beds and 50 percent of the salt marshes around Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island have been lost due to human activity, and the Raritan Bay area in lower New York Harbor has lost over 80 percent of its original wetlands. In New Jersey, only a mere 2 percent of the historic native oyster populations have survived after suffering from disease, over-

harvesting, and habitat destruction. In the Chesapeake Bay over 16 million bushels of oysters were harvested in the early 1900s, but the harvest has collapsed to only 45,000 bushels in 2006. In Long Island Sound more than 40 percent of the original wetlands are gone. The story continues on the west coast as well. San Francisco Bay has lost 95 percent of its original marshland, and in the Puget Sound region more than 500 streams, rivers, and lakes are impaired by poor water quality partly as a result of degraded habitats that are no longer able to filter pollutants.

A growing threat to our nation's estuaries is climate change. The impacts of climate change will exacerbate the already increasing stresses on our sensitive coastal resources. Estuary wildlife and the habitat they depend on are threatened by changes in rainfall, temperature, sea level, soil conditions and air pollution. For example, altered rain and snowfall patterns throughout the U.S. will affect the volume and timing of fresh water flowing into our estuaries, consequently changing salinity and sediment conditions, which will impact sensitive habitats and species. While no one knows how precipitation patterns might be altered, changing fresh water flows would affect the distribution and abundance of some shellfish such as oysters, as well as rare species, which depend on high salinity salt marsh habitats.

Sea level rise is of particular concern. As sea level rises, the frequency and duration of coastal flooding and inundation will increase, severely impacting sensitive coastal resources and adjacent properties. For example, in San Francisco Bay, sea level rose about seven inches over the last century at the Golden Gate, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the 2006 California Climate Action Team project it could rise another two to three feet by 2100, which could cause coastal flooding of Bay wetlands and shoreline cities.

Our challenges are daunting, but through collaborative efforts like the partnership we have with the USFWS Coastal Program, significant progress has been made, and we know it is only the beginning. I would like to now turn your attention to the USFWS Coastal Program, first to highlight what we consider to be successes of the program, and then identify several areas for programmatic improvements.

COLLABORATION WITH THE USFWS COASTAL PROGRAM

RAE has enjoyed a collaborative relationship, a partnership in our view, with the Coastal Program for many years. The nature and scope of our partnership spans the national and local levels as we work with CP headquarters on long-term issues, and locally the program works with our member groups through Regional CP staff to conduct on-the-ground habitat restoration.

It is critically important to realize that successful partnerships do not just happen; it is hard work and requires planning, dedication, and constant nurturing, often through personal relationships. There are also three essential components that must exist for partnership to be successful:

- A long-term commitment to work together;
- Willingness to share knowledge, expertise and/or capacity; and
- Shared goals.

If any of these elements are missing or weak, the partnership is doomed to fail.

As an example of a true partnership, the Coastal Program recently worked with RAE member Save The Bay – San Francisco as well as the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge to restore salt marsh on Bair Island. This project is helping to provide critical habitat for a variety of species, including the endangered California clapper rail and the salt marsh harvest mouse, and a number of birds that traverse the area on their journey across the Pacific.

On the East Coast, the Coastal Program assisted RAE member Chesapeake Bay Foundation to choose and prepare a site to plant redhead grass near the Magothy River in Maryland. This is a good example of the invaluable technical assistance that the Coastal Program is able to provide to a non-governmental organization, which can then better restore habitat for numerous migratory bird and interjurisdictional fish species.

In the Gulf, the Coastal Program worked side-by-side with RAE member Galveston Bay Foundation to construct geotextile tube offshore breakwaters on Snake Island Cove. This effort has led to the protection of 200 acres of estuarine marsh from erosion and the creation of a 65 acre calm shallow water area conducive to seagrass restoration.

The Coastal Program also is essential in efforts to restore fish passage of anadromous fish populations and restore riverine habitat. RAE member Conservation Law Foundation worked with the Coastal Program and other regional partners to support the removal of dams along the Penobscot River as well as install fishways to restore native Atlantic salmon.

MAKING THE COASTAL PROGRAM MORE EFFECTIVE

The Coastal Program has grown significantly in relevance and geographic scope since it first began as a pilot program in 1985 in the Chesapeake Bay. It now has a local presence in 22 locations, including the Great Lakes. It provides critical financial and technical assistance to a variety of government and nongovernmental organizations for habitat restoration and protection that contributes to the recovery and protection of USFWS Trust Species. Restore America's Estuaries is proud to be one of the many partners working side-by-side with the Coastal Program to achieve on-the-ground habitat restoration.

In a 1994 Memorandum to USFWS Regional Offices, the Acting USFWS Director referred to the Coastal Program as "...the keystone of the Services coastal activities". Now, 16 years later, it is time for the Program to be fully authorized by Congress, and embraced by the Service.

We offer the following recommendations, which if implemented, would significantly strengthen the effectiveness of the Coastal Program, both within the Service, and for working with partners on the ground.

Recommendation #1 Authorize the Program

We believe that authorizing the Coastal Program into law is the most important action that Congress could take to improve the effectiveness of this important program. First and foremost, by taking this action Congress would declare that protecting, restoring, and enhancing habitat for the Service's coastal-dependent trust species is a priority, and that the Coastal Program plays a vital role in this effort. This is incredibly important at a time of fewer funds and competing

programs. Further, authorizing the program would provide assurance to Coastal Program partners that the program will continue to be around for a long time to come.

Through codification, Congress also would help ensure the fidelity of annual Coastal Program appropriations and that the Program has the resources it needs to be effective. Transparency is a paramount concern in efforts to ensure the biggest bang for the buck in completing restoration projects. As we work to increase the pace and scale of restoring habitat nationwide, funding fidelity is critical to ensure that CP dollars are spent wisely and for the purposes intended by Congress.

In addition, Congressional authorization would help ensure that Federal efforts to protect and restore coastal habitat are complimentary and that mission creep by other Federal agencies does not jeopardize the program's efficacy and unique role. Numerous Federal agencies currently conduct restoration work on our nation's coasts, but each has a distinct mission that yields different yet meaningful outcomes. The Coastal Program's mission requires that their work specifically benefit Federal Trust Species, so they may select and conduct their restoration projects very differently than that of another agency but yield just as successful results.

Recommendation #2 Improve Capacity

Although the Coastal Program has a presence on the Atlantic, Pacific and the Gulf Coast of Texas, and in the Great Lakes, there continue to be gaps in the network. These gaps limit the Coastal Program's ability to support conservation partnerships and deliver the program in several critical coastal areas.

We applaud the addition of a new central California office which hopefully will be established this year, but a number of other regions currently lack capacity such as the mid-Gulf (LA, MS, AL). The CP is an effective, well-received program and should be represented in all coastal areas, including the Great Lakes. It is therefore critical that CP establish a long-term capacity building plan to close these gaps and provide assistance in all coastal regions of the U.S.

Recommendation #3 Enhance Commitment to Partnerships

Currently, the Coastal Program lacks a staff structure that is homogenous across the nation and reflective of a national program. Rather, each region of the Fish and Wildlife Service has individual discretion over whether they employ dedicated CP coordinators, thus creating a confusing lack of order across regions which results in CP winners and losers.

We believe that in order for the CP to be truly national in scope, each region must have full-time liaisons that are dedicated solely to the Coastal Program. Only then will the program be able to enhance partnerships equally across the regions that yield significant on-the-ground achievements.

Recommendation #4 Integrate With DOI Initiatives

Several new initiatives underway by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and USFWS provide opportunities for making use of the CP on-the-ground conservation delivery service. As part of DOI's Climate Change Initiative, the USFWS has launched an integrated effort to strategically link science, planning, and conservation services through the Landscape Conservation

Cooperatives. Since coasts will experience the first signs and impacts of sea level rise and other climate change impacts, the CP is uniquely situated to translate the science of LCC's and deliver on-the-ground habitat restoration to priority habitats.

The recently announced Great Outdoors initiative is another opportunity to integrate CP services with DOI programs. Existing and future restoration projects often involve the direct participation of volunteers. Families, school classes, scouting groups, and corporate employees turn out to help with marsh grass planting, stream clean-ups, and invasives removal. The connection between individuals and the outdoors could not be any stronger. DOI should recognize and embrace existing programs like the CP that already work so well to bring families and youth to conserve and restore the natural environment.

Recommendation #5 Provide Adequate Funding

Support for the management and stewardship of our coastal ecosystems that bridge land and sea has never been more important due to the accelerating pace of environmental change now occurring. While environmental degradation of estuaries has continued in recent years, the CP has been a key program aimed at on-the-ground habitat restoration. For a relatively small program (approximately \$13 million annually) that leverages \$3 non-Federal dollars for every Federal dollar spent, the CP is one of the most cost-effective habitat restoration programs within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A challenge has been that without adequate funding, it is difficult for the CP to expand its activities and begin to tackle the more than \$3 billion restoration backlog that currently exists. Thus, it is critical that the CP budget begin to narrow this gap if we hope to have a meaningful impact on habitats nationally.

As mentioned under Recommendation #1, it is also critical to improve transparency of the CP as good business practice to ensure the wisest use of taxpayer dollars.

Recommendation #6 Realign responsibilities for the Coastal Barriers Resources Act

A somewhat odd relationship has developed over time between the Coastal Program and the Coastal Barriers Resources Act (CBRA). CBRA, first enacted in 1982, designates various undeveloped coastal barrier islands, depicted by specific maps prepared under the auspices of the USFWS, for inclusion in the Coastal Barrier Resources System (System). Areas so designated are ineligible for direct or indirect Federal financial assistance that might support development. Implementation of USFWS responsibilities for preparing maps under CBRA is administered by the USFWS Branch of Resource Mapping and Support, but funding for CBRA, over \$700,000 for 2010, comes out of the Coastal Program. The annual funding level for CBRA is never explicitly expressed by the Service which adds additional uncertainty to funds actually available for the Coastal Program. We find this unacceptable. We strongly recommend that all budget and implementation responsibilities within the USFWS for the Coastal Barriers Resources Act be aligned under the Branch of Resource Mapping and Support. The CBRA authorization expires this year (2010) and we believe this realignment should be considered during reauthorization.