

Written Statement of Dr. Holly Bamford  
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United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works  
Examining Restoration Efforts in the Great Lakes Region

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Chair Capito, Ranking Member Whitehouse, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's role in delivering conservation outcomes for the Great Lakes region. I am Dr. Holly Bamford, Chief Conservation Officer of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). I am honored to speak to the vital work our partners are doing on the ground and to the enduring importance of the GLRI as one of the most successful federal conservation programs in our nation's history.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is an independent, congressionally chartered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization created by bipartisan legislation and signed into law by President Reagan in 1984. Congress established NFWF with a clear purpose: to work with public and private partners to advance practical, voluntary conservation solutions that allow people and nature to thrive together. NFWF is not a federal agency, but we are uniquely authorized by Congress to serve as a bridge between the public and private sectors in service of conservation.

To date, the Foundation has enabled a total conservation impact of more than \$12 billion across more than 23,900 projects nationwide. Last year alone, NFWF awarded more than \$590 million in grants to support more than 800 projects, leveraging more than \$325 million in matching contributions and generating a total conservation impact of more than \$925 million. By leveraging non-federal investment, encouraging voluntary participation, and supporting locally driven solutions, NFWF helps ensure that conservation on public and private lands remains durable, cost-effective, and broadly supported.

NFWF currently works with 13 federal government partners and more than 65 corporate and foundation partners, and funds work across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. territories. By blending public and private funding, NFWF makes strategic, landscape-scale investments that complement federal agency missions while respecting local priorities. Ninety-six cents of every federal dollar we receive is spent directly on conservation, and every dollar Congress directly appropriates to NFWF goes to on-the-ground conservation projects. Each of those appropriated federal dollars is matched with at least one non-federal dollar, ensuring a strong return on taxpayer investment.

NFWF also operates with the highest standards of accountability and transparency. We notify Congress in advance of every grant we intend to award that includes more than \$10,000 in federal funds, and all grants are publicly available through our online grants library. Each year, NFWF undergoes an independent audit and has received an unqualified opinion—with no

material weaknesses or deficiencies—for 17 consecutive years. We also consistently qualify as a low-risk auditee under Office of Management and Budget standards.

NFWF's unique statutory role enables us to pool public and private funds in a single grant portfolio, creating program-level leverage that no single federal agency can easily replicate. Through NFWF's competitive grant programs, federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can combine public and private resources and work with NFWF to direct those pooled funds through a single, coordinated pipeline to the highest-priority conservation projects.

This pooling function is not merely administrative—it is strategic. When multiple funders align behind a shared set of priority outcomes—fish passage, wetland restoration, stormwater management, and coastal security—NFWF's competitive grant process helps ensure that projects are selected for scientific merit, clear and measurable outcomes, and the ability to leverage additional matching contributions from grantees. Every NFWF program encourages grantees to provide matching funds, ensuring that federal investment catalyzes, rather than replaces, non-federal commitment.

NFWF's grant programs are anchored in science-based business plans developed by technical experts and approved by our Board of Directors. Each business plan identifies measurable conservation targets—acres of wetland restored, miles of stream reconnected, gallons of stormwater storage added—against which program outcomes are rigorously tracked. Grantees are required to report on both financial expenditures and biological, ecological, and physical outcomes, and NFWF conducts active grant management throughout each project's lifespan. This commitment to monitoring and evaluation ensures that federal and private dollars are producing real, verifiable results—and that underperforming approaches are corrected or discontinued. In short, NFWF works hand in hand with its funding partners to ensure the American taxpayer sees a strong return on investment.

### **NFWF and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative**

NFWF has worked with EPA for more than two decades to deploy funding for conservation and water quality improvements. As structured under the Clean Water Act, EPA's Geographic Programs implement large-scale restoration efforts in priority watersheds. NFWF partners with EPA to administer programs within these watersheds—namely the Chesapeake Bay, Long Island Sound, and the Great Lakes. These programs advance water quality through voluntary, on-the-ground restoration activities and support coordinated conservation efforts across federal and state entities. In the last year alone, NFWF provided awards to 122 grantees across these three geographies totaling \$54.6 million in EPA funding for on-the-ground conservation projects. Those funds were supplemented with \$18.1 million in non-federal funds and matched with \$48.9 million, providing a total conservation impact of \$121.6 million across these landscapes.

The Great Lakes are one of the world's most extraordinary natural resources and are the largest of EPA's Geographic Programs. Holding more than 20 percent of the Earth's surface freshwater,

spanning more than 10,000 miles of shoreline, and providing drinking water to tens of millions of Americans, the Great Lakes basin is an ecological and economic treasure of national significance. The basin's vast network of coastal marshes, inland wetlands, and northern forests provide critical services—water filtration, flood storage, nutrient cycling, and habitat for more than 200 globally rare species.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative represents the most significant federal investment ever made to protect and restore this ecosystem. NFWF is proud to be a longstanding partner in the GLRI's implementation, administering competitive grant programs that translate federal appropriations into durable, measurable outcomes on the ground across all eight Great Lakes states.

NFWF administers several voluntary grant programs that use GLRI funding as a cornerstone investment, including:

Sustain Our Great Lakes (SOGL): NFWF's flagship habitat restoration grant program for the basin, funded in significant part by GLRI through EPA and USFWS, as well as private partners;

Chi-Cal Rivers Fund: A place-based program focused on improving water quality, restoring habitat, and advancing nature-based solutions in the Chicago-Calumet River system;

Southeast Michigan Program: A place-based program supporting habitat restoration, green infrastructure, and runoff reduction projects in the seven-county region surrounding Detroit;

Conservation Partners Program: A working lands program providing technical assistance to agricultural producers in the Great Lakes Basin to support implementation of voluntary conservation practices; and

Collectively, these programs advance the goals of the GLRI Action Plan IV Focus Areas 2, 3, and 4, including habitat and wildlife protection and restoration, invasive species management, nonpoint source nutrient and sediment reduction, and community resilience.

NFWF's SOGL program is a voluntary public-private partnership designed to sustain, restore, and protect fish, wildlife, and habitat in the basin by leveraging funding, building conservation capacity, and focusing partners and resources on key ecological issues. The program is administered by NFWF in partnership with Cleveland-Cliffs, the Caerus Foundation, the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, EPA, USFWS, and USFS.

SOGL awards competitive grants for on-the-ground habitat restoration and enhancement, with priorities aligned directly to the GLRI Action Plan's focus areas: 2) Invasive Species, 3) Nonpoint Source Pollution, and 4) Habitats and Species. Funded activities include stream and riparian habitat restoration, aquatic barrier removal and fish passage improvement, wetland restoration and enhancement, invasive species control, nature-based solutions to reduce flooding and increase stormwater storage, and activation of restored habitats and greenspace.

From 2006 through 2024, SOGL has awarded more than \$142 million across 529 projects. Grantees have matched SOGL's investment with an additional \$180 million in non-federal contributions, bringing the total on-the-ground conservation impact to more than \$323.3

million—a leverage ratio of more than 2:1 on the program's total investment, and substantially higher on the federal GLRI component alone.

Some of the program's most significant cumulative outcomes include:

- More than 2,630 miles of stream reconnected for fish access;
- 58,888 acres of wetland and associated upland habitat restored; and
- 389.7 million gallons of stormwater storage added to protect water quality in Great Lakes communities.

More importantly, these outcomes translate into tangible benefits: brook trout returning to cold-water streams; coastal marshes filtering runoff before it reaches Lake Erie; nature-based infrastructure reducing flood risk for communities across the region; and expanded hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation opportunities for residents throughout the region.

Over the past few years, NFWF and its partners have awarded significant funding that has contributed greatly toward GLRI's goals. In October 2023, SOGL announced \$17.6 million in competitive grants for 43 projects—the largest single grant slate ever awarded in the program's history. These grants leveraged approximately \$25 million in additional non-federal grantee support, for a total conservation impact of \$42.6 million. The 2023 round funded projects across Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, with a continued emphasis on stream connectivity, wetland restoration, nature-based solutions to reduce flooding, and invasive species management.

In September 2024, SOGL announced \$13.8 million in competitive grants for 33 projects across seven states—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. These awards leveraged approximately \$12.1 million in non-federal matching contributions from grantees, generating a total conservation impact of \$25.9 million. Collectively, the 2024 SOGL projects are projected to:

Restore more than 268 miles of stream and riparian habitat.

- Add 43 million gallons of stormwater storage;
- Restore 5,728 acres of wetland and upland habitat;
- Plant 133 acres of trees for stormwater storage and habitat;
- Install more than 1.8 million square feet of green infrastructure; and
- Benefit priority species, including brook trout, lake sturgeon, piping plover, and least bittern.

In 2025, SOGL awarded nearly \$8.7 million in grants to continue support for the program's core priority areas: stream and riparian habitat restoration for species and water quality; nature-based solutions; invasive species control; and activation of previously restored habitats. The 2025 program continues to be administered with EPA, USFWS, and the U.S. Forest Service as key federal partners, ensuring alignment with GLRI Action Plan IV priorities. To demonstrate the

power of the public-private partnership model NFWF implements—and the importance of GLRI’s continued investment in conservation and nature-based solutions—here are a few examples of NFWF projects transforming habitats and communities throughout the basin.

**Coastal wetland restoration in Michigan:** In 2022, NFWF awarded a \$310,000 grant to Ducks Unlimited (DU) to help restore the St. Clair Flats Wildlife Area—one of the largest, most productive, and biologically diverse freshwater deltas in the United States. The Great Lakes basin has lost more than 50% of its historic wetlands. DU and its partners are restoring 825 acres of coastal wetland within Harsens Island’s East Marsh to help reverse this loss. Once completed, the project will enable Michigan DNR to actively manage water levels across the marsh unit—restoring habitat, controlling invasive species, and protecting the area from increasingly unpredictable Great Lakes water levels and flooding. This investment safeguards a premier state wildlife area, reduces coastal flood risk, strengthens populations of waterfowl and priority marsh-nesting birds such as black tern, supports hunting opportunities, and benefits the local outdoor economy.

**Stream restoration in Wisconsin:** Northeast Wisconsin contains some of the most intact and thriving cold-water stream systems left in the Great Lakes region, but many are fragmented by aging road crossings, culverts, and other infrastructure that prevents priority fish species, such as brook trout, from moving up and down these streams to spawn. In 2022, NFWF awarded a \$409,000 grant to Trout Unlimited, which was matched with more than \$1,000,000, to remove 11 barriers and reconnect 47 miles of streams that native brook trout depend on to survive. By replacing outdated and undersized culverts on and near the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, this effort restores the natural flow of water, fish, and sediment through critical trout streams. The result is stronger, self-sustaining fisheries, healthier watersheds, and infrastructure that is better prepared for flooding and extreme weather—all on public lands that Americans hunt, fish, and recreate on every year. This grant also delivers long-term benefits for local economies, anglers, and rural communities.

**Marsh restoration in Ohio:** Ohio, home to the southern shore of Lake Erie—one of the most biologically productive of the five Great Lakes—supports vital coastal wetlands, critical fish habitat, and recreational and commercial fisheries that generate billions of dollars in economic activity. NFWF’s programs have consistently recognized this importance by directing competitive grants to Ohio-based organizations and projects.

A unique example of NFWF’s role in accelerating GLRI goals by providing catalytic, long-term funding to support high-priority restoration actions appears in Ohio on the southern shore of Lake Erie. SOGL has funded a decade-long restoration effort (2015–2026) by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History to revitalize Mentor Marsh—a 765-acre National Natural Landmark. With \$761,000 in total NFWF grant awards and more than \$1.3 million in matching funds, this comprehensive project combats invasive species (primarily *Phragmites*), restores native wetland and swamp forest habitats, and improves marsh hydrology and connectivity to benefit hundreds of wildlife species. The restoration has been a remarkable success, restoring 600 acres of wetland habitat and transforming an ecologically barren, *Phragmites*-choked landscape into a vibrant coastal marsh that is now a regionally renowned destination for birders and a natural jewel on the shore of Lake Erie. Recovery highlights include native plants sprouting from

the seed bank, rare marsh birds returning to nest, and fish, turtles, frogs, otters, beavers, and many other species returning to the marsh.

### **NFWF, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and Coastal Security and Resilience**

The Great Lakes coastline presents a distinct but increasingly urgent coastal resilience challenge. Unlike ocean coasts, Great Lakes communities face extreme lake-level volatility combined with shoreline erosion, intense storm events, loss of coastal wetlands, and the degradation of natural buffers that once protected communities from flooding. NFWF's National Coastal Resilience Fund (NCRF) explicitly includes Great Lakes states as eligible coastal states, recognizing these shared vulnerabilities.

The NCRF represents one of the most significant public-private investments in nature-based coastal infrastructure in our nation's history. Established in 2018 at Congress's direction, in partnership with NOAA and private partners including Shell USA, Occidental, Entergy, and Salesforce, the NCRF has grown into a national program of extraordinary reach and impact.

Since its founding, NCRF has awarded more than \$671 million across 554 projects, leveraging an additional \$523 million in matching contributions from grantees, for a total conservation impact exceeding \$1.2 billion across 31 states and U.S. territories. Despite these levels of investment, demand for NCRF funding has always exceeded available resources. In 2025 alone, 600 communities requested more than \$1 billion in funding, but NFWF was only able to accept 68 applications, leaving more than 500 community applications unfunded. That year, NFWF and its partners awarded 68 coastal resilience grants totaling \$78 million, leveraging \$38 million in grantee matching contributions for a total conservation impact of \$116 million—but it is clear that the number of communities seeking funding is growing.

The NCRF funds a broad portfolio of nature-based and hybrid infrastructure approaches that are tailored to the various coastal areas throughout the United States. NFWF's staff works closely with grantee staff across the country to ensure funding addresses the unique needs of different communities' geographic characteristics. As such, NFWF funds a range of approaches including:

- Coastal marsh and wetland restoration — restoring the natural buffering capacity of wetlands against storm surge and flooding;
- Living shorelines — using oyster reefs, native vegetation, and low-profile sills to stabilize eroding shorelines while maintaining habitat function;
- Dune and beach system restoration — rebuilding natural coastal barriers that protect inland communities;
- Floodplain reconnection — restoring natural flood storage in rivers and streams;
- Oyster and coral reef restoration — rebuilding marine infrastructure that reduces wave energy and supports fisheries; and
- Hybrid "green-gray" solutions — combining natural features with appropriately designed hard infrastructure where community risk reduction needs require it.

The NCRF explicitly includes Great Lakes coastal states, recognizing that lake-level volatility, coastal erosion, and storm impacts pose risks comparable to those facing ocean coastal communities. Since 2018, NFWF has invested \$38 million, coupled with \$36.5 million in grantee match, across 47 grants for a total conservation impact of \$74.5 million in the Great Lakes region. These grants have built capacity in 15 communities, restored 108 acres of floodplain and marsh, and restored 6 miles of coastline.

I have included a few examples that demonstrate the power of the public-private partnership model NFWF implements through the NCRF.

**Creating Coastal Wetlands and Enhancing Nearshore Habitat in Ohio:** NFWF awarded \$3,000,000 to the City of Willoughby, Ohio to create a hybrid living shoreline, build coastal and upland wetlands, and restore a bluff using native landscaping that will benefit pollinators in Osborne Park. The project will reduce community exposure to coastal storms, flooding, and erosion while enhancing habitat for fish and wildlife. This is one of the highest-leverage NCRF grants in the Great Lakes region in terms of match ratio — NFWF's \$3 million grant unlocked nearly \$9 million in additional funding for a total conservation impact of nearly \$12 million. The project addresses a pattern common along the southern Lake Erie shore: hardened bluffs and armored shorelines that accelerate wave energy and erosion rather than absorbing it. Creating layered coastal and upland wetlands at Osborne Park serves as a model for how lakefront communities can transition away from erosive gray infrastructure toward self-sustaining coastal buffers using nature-based infrastructure.

**Improving Fish Passage and Reducing Flood Risk in Ypsilanti:** In 2024, NFWF awarded \$7.5 million that generated an additional \$5.9 million for a total project investment of \$13.4 million. The project is restoring the Huron River to a free-flowing waterway to enhance habitat for walleye, smallmouth bass, white bass, and sensitive native mussel species while providing flood risk reduction benefits to the city. It is designed to contribute to Ypsilanti's goals of sustainable infrastructure, improved water quality, and enhanced community resilience to a changing climate.

This is among the largest NCRF implementation grants in the Great Lakes region and reflects several of the key aspects of the program. Removing barriers to river flow reduces upstream flood risk while restoring the kind of connected riparian corridor that buffers downstream communities from precipitation-driven flooding. The inclusion of native mussels — powerful water-quality indicators and filtration species — makes this project significant beyond mere flood reduction and provides improved habitat for multiple species.

**Advancing Priority Coastal Resilience Projects in Great Lakes Shoreline Communities:** In 2022, NFWF awarded the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative \$1,000,000 to advance five projects that will use nature-based solutions to restore habitat and strengthen coastal resilience in shoreline communities. The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative is a binational organization representing mayors and local governments from across the basin. This multi-city grant model allows NFWF to efficiently support several municipal projects through

multiple phases of the projects, from design to implementation, and build institutional capacity in cities that often lack internal expertise in nature-based coastal design. A 2024 follow-on grant expanded this to six projects across Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much of NFWF's funding in the Great Lakes region relies on the GLRI. Without continued GLRI funding, the private and other federal contributions that NFWF attracts would have no federal anchor around which to organize. NFWF's decades of work in the region, and the successes we and our partners have achieved, demonstrate the catalytic investment federal funds provide and underscore why Congress's reauthorization of this program is so vitally important.

NFWF stands ready to continue serving as a trusted, efficient, and effective partner to Congress, federal agencies, and the American people in the restoration of the Great Lakes and the protection of America's coasts. Our 40-year track record of more than \$12 billion in total conservation impact, our ability to multiply federal investment through private leverage, our commitment to science-based grantmaking and rigorous outcome monitoring, and our deep relationships with the conservation community across the Great Lakes basin position us to deliver lasting results for the fish, wildlife, and communities of this region.

Thank you, Chair Capito, Ranking Member Whitehouse, and the distinguished Members of this Committee. I am honored to have had the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.