



United States Representatives
Before The Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife,
Committee on Natural Resources
Legislative Hearing on H.R 46.77

**Written Testimony of Aaron M. Sanders
Associate Director of Advocacy and Policy
Testifying on Behalf of Natural Areas Conservancy**

January 20, 2022

Thank you subcommittee Chairperson Huff, Ranking Member Bentz, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife. My name is Aaron Sanders and I'm the Associate Director of Advocacy and Policy at the Natural Areas Conservancy, the non-profit partner to New York City Parks supporting the management of 20,000 acres of forests, wetlands, and grasslands. Despite being the most densely populated city in the nation, New York City continues to be defined by the natural features that originally made it an ideal location for human settlement. Our city is a city of water—boasting an astounding 520 miles of shoreline and retaining over 100 miles of streams. Each of our five boroughs is home to large swaths of natural areas, including swamps and freshwater marshes. Last year NAC released the Wetlands Management Framework, a local Plan and blueprint for the long-term management of NYC wetlands.

Before the committee today is H.R 46.77, which would provide much-needed support for waterways in New York and New Jersey. This legislation was crafted to protect and restore hundreds of miles of waterways that flow through the Hudson Valley, across New Jersey, and into New York-New Jersey Harbor. A fundamental issue that the Watershed face is a lack of federal support for water resources. In addition to climate resiliency, this bill provides economic opportunities for people who live within these waterways.

The Problem

New York and New Jersey have faced a series of climate crises over the years. Federal investment in climate infrastructure is needed in this region, these issues will persist. 500 miles of coastline is vulnerable to sea-level rise and frequent storms. Hurricane Ida is a recent example of this crisis: dozens of residents of New York and New Jersey lost their lives because of urban flooding.

Coastal cities are disproportionately impacted by storm surges. As stormwater pushes further inland built infrastructure including roadways, housing and mass transit are threatened. Wetlands provide a natural buffer and mitigate against the impacts of climate change. However, our region's wetlands require a significant investment in order to provide these benefits. The Watershed Protection Act is a proactive step towards combating future storms and urban



flooding. Prior to Ida, Hurricane Sandy caused \$100 billion in damage to New York and New Jersey coastal areas. Without federal support, our region will continue to face threats to its waterways.

The impacts of sea-level rise and storm surge disproportionately impact low-income communities, including low-income New Yorkers of color who rely on affordable housing. These communities have fewer resources to deal with climate change. We have an opportunity to serve these communities by investing in natural resources. H.R 46.77 stands to increase the resilience of environmental justice communities throughout our region.

Water quality in this region is also dependent on the management and care of waterways. As the sea level rises this impact — Sea level rise affects freshwater quality by increasing the salinity of coastal rivers and bays and causing saltwater intrusion into fresh groundwater resources in New York-New Jersey's coastal regions. This ultimately impacts the safety of drinking water. The New York-New Jersey Watershed Protection Act is a significant investment in our communities and our coastal wetlands.

I wish to emphasize the importance of this bill and how it impacts natural areas wetlands in New York City. New York City is losing an average of six acres of wetlands each year. By the 2050s, predicted sea-level rise will drown many of New York City's remaining wetlands — unless action is taken now. Locally, Sea level rise and storm surge impact natural areas. This legislation can positively impact the work that we are doing to impact to restore manage local infrastructure in New York City.

As the bill sponsor, Rep. Tonko mentioned in his press release: “As America's most crowded watershed, the New York-New Jersey Watershed serves a vital role for millions. Despite its central importance in maintaining local ecosystems and spurring growth, the watershed remains significantly underfunded.”

Solution

This committee has an opportunity to advance legislation that supports natural resources and economic development in the states of New York and New Jersey. Robust funding is needed to curb this alarming trend of storms and urban flooding in our region. The following provisions in the bill will protect from flood risk:

- Directs the Secretary of the Interior to build on and coordinate restoration activities at all levels of government.
- Establishes a program to coordinate restoration and award grants to help fund restoration projects in local communities.
 - The program would ensure that restoration efforts utilize science-based principles to protect fish and wildlife habitats, improve water quality, increase public access



to the estuary, mitigate flood risks, deliver funds to environmental justice communities, and develop public outreach and educational activities.

- Authorizes \$50,000,000 annually through the fiscal year 2027 to accomplish these goals.
- Locally, our organization has partnered with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to create the Wetlands Management Framework— this is a comprehensive, 25-year plan intended to support the care and management of wetlands, an important natural resource for New York City.

Conclusion

The Natural Areas Conservancy strongly encourages this committee to support and pass HR. 46.77. As an organization that supports natural areas throughout New York City, we recognize the immediate need for healthy waterways. Long-term, your support can help mitigate any damage to the forest, wetlands, and trails that we manage. Your support of this bill can help us manage and improve natural areas in New York City.

Thank you to the committee for considering this legislation related to waterways, given its role as vital living infrastructure that benefits New Yorkers, and we look forward to working with the Committee to advance meaningful and effective urban forest legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

Aaron M. Sanders

Associate Director of Policy and Advocacy at The Natural Areas Conservancy