



Written Testimony of:

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Committee on Natural Resources
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Good morning, Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the Committee. It is an honor and a privilege to address you this morning regarding House Resolution 1514, the proposed Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission Act of 2025.

My name is Ben Batten, and I proudly serve as a Deputy Director for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. For the past twenty years, I have dedicated my career to the science and practical management of inland fisheries and aquatic resources. I'm here this morning as Chairman of the Mississippi Interstate Cooperative Resource Association, or MICRA. This organization, formed in 1991, is a partnership of state, federal, and tribal entities that collaborate on the management of interjurisdictional fisheries and other aquatic resources in the Mississippi River Basin. Members include 28 state wildlife agencies with fisheries management jurisdiction in the basin, along with several federal agency partners, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The Mississippi River Basin and its tributaries comprise one of the largest and most valuable ecosystems in the world. It is the largest watershed in the United States and the fourth largest watershed in the world, after only the Amazon, Congo, and the Nile. The Mississippi River Basin covers more than 41% of the continental United States, including 31 states and two Canadian Provinces, and over 1.2 million square miles. Its immense scale presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges for cooperative resource management.

The Mississippi River Basin supports a wide range of subsistence, commercial, and recreational fisheries. Within the basin, recreational fishing alone had an estimated \$26 billion-dollar economic impact in 2024 (American Sportfishing Association 2024). Nationally, recreational

fishing supports more than one million jobs in multiple manufacturing, sales, and service industries (e.g., bait and tackle, boat manufacturing, tourism) and related expenditures help support entire communities in some rural areas (ASA 2024b). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated there were more than 35 million licensed freshwater anglers in 2022, and all fishing-related expenditures (freshwater and saltwater) totaled just under \$100 billion. State and federal agencies must collaborate to ensure the long-term sustainability and security of the basin's valuable fishery resources.

Fisheries in the Mississippi River Basin face critical threats due to water quality and quantity issues, habitat fragmentation and degradation, and the invasion of Aquatic Invasive Species that threaten their supply and utilization. Fish species that move between management jurisdictions (i.e., interjurisdictional) create complex resource management problems. There are at least 90 fish species in the Mississippi River basin that can be subject to interjurisdictional management, including several migratory species with complex life histories that travel hundreds or even thousands of miles across multiple states and jurisdictional boundaries. The scale of the basin's fisheries and their challenges demand an elevated perspective and an enhanced level of collaboration among management agencies to ensure sustainable resources for future generations.

States within the Mississippi River Basin have formed multiple regional interstate partnerships, as well as the basin-wide partnership known as MICRA to promote cooperation and communication among the conservation agencies that manage the interjurisdictional fishery resources of the basin. Despite the economic, ecological, and social importance of the fishery resources in the Mississippi River Basin and the complexity of managing sustainable fisheries with the multiplicity of resource management authorities, there are no congressionally recognized interstate compacts or federal legislation to guide or facilitate cooperative fisheries management for the entirety of the basin. The Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission Act would establish a Fishery Commission to facilitate basin-wide, interagency collaboration for fisheries management, including shared management objectives, and the collaborative planning, implementation, and evaluation of management and necessary research actions to ensure the long-term biological and economic sustainability of interjurisdictional fisheries resources in the basin. Similar to the management of marine fisheries, the long-term sustainability of fishery resources in the Mississippi River Basin depends on basin wide science derived from fishery assessments and research that is sufficient to inform science-based decision-making, policies, and regulations. There have been substantial investments in habitat restoration and the control of aquatic invasive species in the basin, but little to no direct investment in managing sustainable interjurisdictional fishery resources within the basin. Intensive management of the basin's fishery resources is crucial for understanding the outcomes of past investments and informing future needs at an ecosystem scale.

The model for the Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission is a proven one that mimics other Commissions managing interjurisdictional fisheries resources in the Great Lakes, the Gulf, the Atlantic, and the Pacific for decades. We visited with the leadership of each of these commission committees as we established a framework for the Mississippi River Basin Fishery

Commission, and we leaned heavily on the Great Lakes Fishery Commission model. That Commission was formed in the 1950s in response to the devastating impact of the invasive Sea Lamprey. We find ourselves in a similar position today, fighting to improve the quality of native fisheries while confronting the challenges of aquatic invasive species, including quagga and zebra mussels, invasive carp, and a plethora of invasive aquatic plants.

We recognize that the responsible stewardship of the aquatic resources of the Mississippi River Basin is a shared responsibility, with the economic stability and the ecological security of the system fundamentally dependent on it. The Fishery Commission will provide the vehicle for the responsible management entities to address the considerable challenges already outlined collaboratively. Entities eligible to voluntarily join the Fishery Commission include the 31 states and all U.S. federally recognized tribal nations located in the Mississippi River Basin, as well as federal agencies with management authorities that have a close nexus with fishery resources and their habitats in the Mississippi River Basin, including but not limited to the United States Geological Survey, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the United States Corps of Engineers ERDC, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The Fishery Commission provides a critical organizational framework for managing fisheries in the Basin. To achieve the necessary level of cooperative, inter-agency management, formal commitments are required from each management authority in the basin, both at the state and federal levels. The Fishery Commission will establish a permanent and formal governance structure that provides collaborative oversight among the states, tribes, and federal agencies sharing responsibility for managing these resources. This would enhance the partners' commitment to work collaboratively and more effectively. A Joint Strategic Plan is already in place through MICRA, signed by 28 states, which will serve as the framework for the Fishery Commission's management plan.

The Fishery Commission will also provide stable and dedicated funding to support essential research, personnel, and management actions. The Fishery Commission will have dedicated staff to provide necessary planning coordination, facilitation, and technical expertise to help member agencies develop, implement, and evaluate cooperative management strategies. This is an important change to ensure the consistent and efficient operation of the Fishery Commission.

Funding would be made available directly to the states and eligible recipients through two different granting mechanisms managed by the Fishery Commission. A formula-based, non-competitive grant program would be awarded to State member entities for eligible interjurisdictional fisheries work. This predictable and stable funding source is critical for states to invest in this cooperative program and carry out interjurisdictional management work. For example, while current funding to combat and manage invasive carp is highly beneficial to state and federal partners, the lack of funding stability makes it difficult for states to make long-term investments in personnel, projects and equipment to tackle this problem. Additionally, there would be a competitive grant program available to eligible entities, which will include states as well as private entities, nongovernmental organizations, institutions of higher education, and

partnerships, to undertake projects, fisheries management research and other activities outlined in the Fishery Commission Management Plans, with priority given to entities providing matching funds for the work.

Finally, the Fishery Commission will have non-binding authority and will not supersede the existing sovereign management authority of any member state over its natural resource regulatory decision-making, for example, setting seasons and limits. Each member state must retain its ability to manage the fisheries in its jurisdiction first and foremost. Commission decision-making will be done through the consensus of its decision makers, and each state's delegate will be that state's chief of fisheries or their designee, ensuring that the commission's decision making and management is led by science.

While the states within the Mississippi Basin have limped along for years working together the best they can with each other and their federal partners on fisheries management decisions with little to no formal framework or funding, it is far past time for this commission to be established. Fish do not know state boundaries and unfortunately, invasive species don't either, and are wreaking havoc on our native fisheries. We need the tools to combat these invasive species and to make wise management decisions, implement programs and projects and conserve habitat that protects and restores our native sportfish, paddlefish and sturgeon populations. We need Congress to give the Mississippi River Basin the tools it so vitally needs to succeed in restoring and protecting America's Watershed for both our current and future generation of anglers, boaters, recreators and our native fish populations, and to eradicate invasive carp within the Basin, and keep them out of the Great Lakes.

I appreciate your time and your action in passing this legacy piece of legislation, the Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission and we look forward to giving you annual updates on all the progress being made following passage of this Act.