



June 13th, 2022

The Honorable Jared Huffman
Chair, Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and
Wildlife
United States House
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Cliff Bentz
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Water,
Oceans, and Wildlife
United States House
1329 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Huffman and Ranking Member Bentz:

On behalf of the Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed, I write in support of H.R. 6949 — the Delaware River Basin Conservation Reauthorization Act — which provides a framework and resources for advancing protection and restoration of the ecologically and economically significant Delaware River Basin.

The Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed unites organizations working throughout the multi-state region to enhance their capacity to effectively advocate and work towards our shared goal of protecting and restoring the Delaware River Basin. Our coalition represents over 175 watershed associations, land conservancies, outdoor recreation and sporting interests, national organizations, and other stakeholder groups working throughout the 13,539 square miles of the Watershed. The bill also has broad and deep support among a diverse array of stakeholders in the communities we represent.

Congress clearly affirmed the importance of protecting the natural resources of the Delaware River Watershed when it passed the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act in December 2016 with bi-partisan support and leadership. The legislation directed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to create and facilitate the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program, a non-regulatory effort that leverages private investment, regional partnerships, and local knowledge to protect and restore the resources of the watershed. The Service has since successfully executed four annual rounds of funding, and is finalizing the fifth, through the Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund, a grant program which Congress required to be the core of the program. Projects include those that improve public access and recreational opportunities, support restoring and protecting vulnerable fish and wildlife habitat, and protect riparian, stream, and wetland habitat.

Since 2018, the Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund has awarded \$26.6 million to 123 projects, which generated \$46 million in match, for a total conservation impact of \$72.6 million. These projects will collectively restore over 20 miles of riparian habitat and 75 miles of stream habitat, conserve and enhance 882 acres of wetland habitat, restore 254 acres of floodplain, improve 22,309 acres of forest habitat and open 4,695 acres for public access. In FY22 alone, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which administers the grants, received a total of 61 proposals requesting \$26.5 million dollars. This amount reinforces a continued need to improve the health and resources of the Watershed for generations to come.



While historically a minimum of a one-to-one non-federal match is required for the grant program, the program is structured to increase the competitiveness of grants that exceed that threshold to leverage the maximum amount of non-federal dollars. To make the program accessible to a wider array of prospective grantees, reauthorization would allow a 90% federal investment with 10% match for small, rural, or disadvantaged communities and the Secretary may waive all match requirements at their own discretion. The Coalition believes this will help reduce funding disparities in a locally driven and cost-effective way, and tap into the tremendous unmet demand to do work throughout the watershed. This type of approach is an efficient and effective way to ensure that limited resources are targeted to where they can provide maximum benefit.

The Delaware River Basin is the five-state region that drains into the Delaware River and Delaware Bay. Along with its historic importance for our nation, the river basin is a powerhouse for the economy and home to more than 8 million people. Significantly, the watershed serves as the source of clean drinking water for 13.3 million people, or roughly five percent of the U.S. population, in the densely populated Mid-Atlantic region.

The Delaware River Basin is an historical icon that is home to nationally significant ecological and recreational assets, including one of the country's most visited national parks, the Delaware Water Gap. It also hosts more than 400 miles of National Wild and Scenic Rivers, six National Wildlife Refuges, and Delaware Bay is one of the largest systems in the National Estuary Program. The basin provides \$21 billion worth of ecosystem services each year, including air and water filtration, nutrient recycling, flood and stormwater control, soil conservation, and globally significant habitat for migratory birds and resident and migratory fish species.

Reauthorization of this critical and well-established federal program would continue to affirm the nationally and historically significant Delaware River Watershed as a resource worth protecting. In order to fully realize the benefits of the Act and help ensure a healthy watershed for generations to come, we must provide continued support to the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program and reauthorize the Program before the Act lapses in September 2023. If passed, the program and restoration successes would continue through 2030.

We greatly appreciate your leadership and thank you for considering the reauthorization of the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act. Please contact me at 701-741-3894 or Kelly.knutson@Njaudubon.org if you have any questions. The Coalition looks forward to working with you on this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Kelly Knutson
Director, Coalition for the Delaware River Watershed