

Freshwater Future Testimony on the Future State of the Wetlands Protection Program  
March 17, 2009

Joint House Committee Meeting: Great Lakes and Environment, Rep. Rebekah Warren, Chair and  
Environmental Quality of the Standing Committee on Appropriations, Rep. Doug Bennett, Chair

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Hello, my name is Ben Tompkins and I am an AmeriCorps Member representing Freshwater Future. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present our concerns about Governor Granholm's proposal to cut Michigan's wetlands program.

Freshwater Future invests in the people and communities caring for our Great Lakes waters. With a focus on community action groups and individuals, we provide professional assistance, funding and access to a broad network of resources and information. Since 1996, Freshwater Future has helped nearly 2,000 local groups and individuals make a difference in their community.

We all share a responsibility for the future of our Great Lakes. Once known as the Sweetwater Seas, the Great Lakes comprise the largest source of fresh water in the world. Our history and our heritage are all linked to the Great Lake landscape. But, these cherished waters are being damaged by untreated sewage, industrial pollutant and invasive species. Compounding these problems is the destruction of wetlands, of which 2/3 have been lost in the Great Lakes region. Here in Michigan, according to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources website, the estimated 11 million acres of Michigan wetlands existing in pre settlement times have now been reduced to less than 3 million acres. Governor Granholm's plan to return the wetland protection program to the federal government in an attempt to balance the budget would likely result in an estimated 930,856 acres of wetlands - approximately 17 percent of Michigan's remaining wetland resources - going unprotected. This plan is penny wise but pound foolish. It will be a devastating blow to Michigan's waters, fish, wildlife, people and the Great Lakes themselves.

### **The Importance of Wetlands to Michigan's Waters and the Great Lakes**

Because they occur where the dry land meets the water, wetlands play a critical role in the management of our water-based resources. Acre for acre, wetlands produce more wildlife and plants than any other Michigan habitat type. To give you an example of how important wetlands are to Michigan's plants and wildlife, consider the fact the while Michigan boasts about 2300 native plant species; 50 percent of these are wetland species of which over 25 percent are threatened or endangered. More than 40 percent of the 575 vertebrate (with a backbone) wildlife species in Michigan live in or utilize wetlands. This includes 10 to 15 of Michigan's 66 mammals, 180 of the 370 Michigan birds, 22 of the 28 Michigan reptiles, and all 23 of Michigan's amphibians. And consider all the other things wetlands do such as:

- Reduce flooding by absorbing runoff from rain and melting snow, slowly releasing excess water into rivers and lakes. For example, a one acre swamp when flooded to a depth of one foot contains 330,000 gallons of water. To give you an idea of how much water that really is, that is enough water to meet the daily supply of 1,250 average homes. (<http://www.aboutnewbern.com/water.htm>) During a storm event this is water that, without wetlands, would run off into our streams and rivers, leading to flooding and related damages. In a report entitled "Protection of Small, Isolated Wetlands in Michigan" by R. Jan Stevens, it is noted that thirty-three studies over the past 20 years have put an estimated value on wetlands of up to \$22,050 per acre for flood control and water quality treatment.
- Wetlands filter pollution from surface runoff, trapping fertilizers, pesticides, sediments, and other contaminants and helping to break some of them down into less harmful substances, improving water clarity and quality.

- Wetlands help recharge groundwater supplies, of which many Michigan residents depend on in their homes.
- Wetlands contribute to natural nutrient and water cycles, and produce vital atmospheric gases, including oxygen.
- Wetlands provide commercial and recreational value to our economy, by producing plants, game birds (ducks, geese) and fur bearing mammals - many fish are directly connected to wetlands, requiring shallow water areas for breeding, feeding and escaping from predators. A 2001 study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates annual tourist income to Michigan from fishing trips to be \$518 million, \$163 million for hunting, and \$282 million for wildlife watching. Almost all of these activities and related tourist incomes are dependant on wetland habitat.
- Finally, Michigan's waters are, for the most part, inextricably linked to water in the Great Lakes. In other words, the health of the Great Lakes is impacted by the health of Michigan's inland lakes, streams, rivers and groundwater – which are all, for the most part, dependant on wetlands for their health.

### **The Importance of Michigan's Wetlands Program to the People of Michigan**

The examples I just gave are reason enough not to sacrifice protections for 17% of Michigan's remaining wetlands and all their associated benefits by keeping our wetlands protection programs. However, an additional reason includes the personal relationships people and community groups who put their efforts into protecting and restoring wetlands have with Department of Environmental Quality staff. Of the nearly 2,000 community based groups and advocates that make up Freshwater Future's network, about 700 of them are here in Michigan. Many strive to protect and restore wetlands in their communities. These efforts are largely made possible because of the accessibility to staff within the Department of Environmental Quality and staffs' ability to be on the ground in those communities to provide guidance and assistance. These relationships and timely access to staff are an essential aspect of community based protection and restoration efforts. And it is during economic times like we are having now in Michigan that we cannot afford to lose participation of citizens and community-based groups in meeting our natural resources protection and restoration needs. Shifting our state wetlands program to a federal agency risks loss of timely access to staff and on-the-ground guidance that will likely result in some disinterment of community groups and citizens.

Thank you for listening to our concerns and considering the points we made today in your decision making. The health of Michigan's waters, our fish and wildlife, tourist economy, and the involvement of citizens in wetlands protection and restoration will all be impacted by the decisions you make.