

The Delaware River Basin Program

A Priority Landscape

Leo Miranda/USFWS

Background

In December 2016, Congress passed the Delaware River Basin Conservation Act and the President signed it into law. The Act directs the Secretary of the Interior, through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), to develop and implement a non-regulatory program to be known as “the Delaware River Basin Restoration Program” within 180 days of enactment.

The Act instructs FWS to draw upon the many plans already developed for this watershed and adopt a basin-wide strategy for habitat conservation, clean water, flood protection, access to outdoor recreation, historic and cultural values, and other ecosystem services. The law also calls for a grant program to provide federal funds to targeted activities. The Act does not allow FWS to hire new employees and does not authorize specific funds for the grant program.

The Act directs FWS to coordinate with agencies including the Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Governors of the Basin states (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware), the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, Delaware River Basin Commission, fish and wildlife joint venture partnerships, and other public agencies and organizations. We will seek input and participation from a broad range of partners and stakeholders, acknowledging the strong collaboration and strategic work already underway in the basin, and build upon this work.

Next Steps

FWS is positioned to lead this collaborative effort and already has more than 13 field offices throughout the

four-state basin that work with partners to conserve fish, wildlife and habitat. We have designated two employees to work with partners to develop this new program by May 29, 2017.

FWS is reaching out to partners in the basin to build upon the coalitions already in place and learn what efforts are underway. We are gathering data and collecting plans and strategies that have been developed for the basin.

FWS is exploring a framework to be modeled after joint ventures, which have been successful conservation partnerships during the last four decades. This model sets clear, measurable goals, is flexible and inclusive, and leverages partner resources and contributions. Joint ventures bring diverse partners together under the guidance of established conservation and restoration plans to design and implement large-scale conservation efforts in support of a shared vision. We plan to construct a process to listen to partners and stakeholders, convene meetings and discussions, and develop a strategy that is strategic and flexible.

At this time, there are no supporting appropriations, and so we will not be establishing a grant program. However, we will establish a strong infrastructure that can provide grant funds once Congress makes them available.

The watershed is vitally important to the people and wildlife of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. FWS is ready to provide leadership and support. We are asking our staff, as well as partners, to contribute their expertise, science, collaborative relationships, and knowledge to build a sustainable landscape for people and wildlife.

Why the Delaware River Basin is a Priority Landscape

- The Delaware River basin is crucial to the health, well-being and economy of the people of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic.
- More than 6.4 million people live within the basin; and 15 million people – including New York City – get their drinking water from this watershed.
- The basin contains the world’s largest freshwater port complex and one of the nation’s largest oil/container ports.
- The Delaware Estuary hosts the largest spawning population of horseshoe crabs in the world. The basin supports the second largest population of migrating shorebirds in North America, as well as tremendous natural resources throughout the basin.
- The Delaware River is the only undammed river east of the Mississippi River. It once supported millions of American shad whose population declined dramatically as a result of poor water quality in the lower river, but populations have been rebounding in recent decades. In addition, the river supports rare species such as the endangered Atlantic sturgeon, and hosts a world class trout fishery.
- These ecological values are also good for the economies in the Delaware River watershed. For example, Cape May is considered one of the best birding hot spots and birders visit every spring and fall to observe birds, stay in local hotels, eat in local restaurants – an economic boost to the local economy in the millions of dollars. The same can be said in other areas all along the watershed.

For information and to stay connected, please contact:

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Horseshoe crabs; Brook trout; Red knot