

Michigan Habitat and Species Workshop
March 13, 2009
MDOT Construction and Technology Building
Lansing, Michigan

Summary Notes

Sharon Hanshue of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) Fisheries Division, provided a welcome on behalf of the state. Michigan is currently in an economic crisis with massive economic change underway. The Great Lakes will play a greater role in the future of Michigan's economy, e.g., from wind generation to recreation and tourism. There is a major challenge to a shrinking state government (e.g., Michigan is proposing to return its wetlands oversight program to the federal government) at the same time as there is an onslaught of massive stimulus funding. Many state officials unsure how to manage new funds in times of shrinking resources.

Victoria Pebbles of the Great Lakes Commission (GLC) described the genesis of the workshops with the publication of the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC) Strategy and the formation of the Habitat/Species work group to facilitate implementation of relevant recommendations.

Mike Greer of the Buffalo District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) provided an overview of the GLRC Strategy and the USACE Habitat Initiative as a Corps-led 2-year initiative to advance the GLRC habitat/species recommendations.

Emily Finnell of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) Office of the Great Lakes provided an overview of the Michigan Great Lakes Plan. The plan used results of studies conducted by the University of Michigan Sea Grant based on original work done by the Brookings Institution to examine economic benefits that would likely occur from restoration activities focused on the Great Lakes. The study results indicate that about 823,000 jobs, representing nearly 25% of Michigan's payroll, are related to the Great Lakes. Also, there is potential economic growth around new industries, including water technologies, wind energy, pollution remediation and ecotourism. Finally, the water technology industry alone is worth about \$50 billion annually, generating approximately 22,000 jobs. The MI Great Lakes Plan is organized around the same 8 topical area as was structured within the GLRC. The Sustainable Development chapter of the MI Great Lakes Plan includes focus on implementation of sustainable energy options. The MI plan does not include any climate change recommendations because there are separate climate initiatives underway across the state. The balance of her presentation focused on the habitat and species recommendations in the plan.

One key recommendation in the MI plan is to protect 500 acres of high priority coastal wetland communities per year. More specifically, the plan calls for restoring 500,000 acres of wetlands and 1,000,000 acres of associated upland by 2079 (requiring a 50% increase in current efforts), including protection of 1,000 acres of high quality wetlands and 2,000 acres of associated habitat per year. Ms. Finnell noted that there are significant challenges of implementing the wetlands goals in light of the state's proposed

elimination of the state wetlands protection program. More information is available on at: www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/Draft_MI_Great_Lakes_Plan_251564_7.pdf.

There was a question from the audience about the definition of restoration. Ms. Finnell indicated that participants who were engaged in developing the report wanted to insure that the definition be fairly broad, including habitat protection (e.g., land or easement acquisition), enhancement and creation. The report includes separate goals for restoration and protection. There was also a question as to whether the state had programs in place to monitor wetlands and other habitat protection restoration in terms of "acres restored." Elimination of the state wetlands program would include elimination efforts to update the state input in the National Wetlands Inventory which would have enabled tracking restoration progress. It was noted that the stimulus funding would not likely address wetlands restoration via state programs, but the President's proposed FY 2010 budget request could help.

Mark Coscarelli of Public Sector Consultants provided an overview of on-going work under the Great Lakes Fishery Trust Initiative. He described a gap analysis of restoration and management in large rivers and nearshore areas. The effort found gaps in nearshore substrate and bathymetry; a non-uniform approach to classifying and mapping habitat; a overall lack of spectral and radar imagery, and others information gaps needed to assess ecological function and dynamics. The GLFT Initiative aims to fill some of the identified gaps. A Steering Committee has been formed and pilot projects will be identified to implement the recommendations. For more information on the GLFT Initiative, visit: www.glft.org. A question was asked about whether the pilot studies were integrating land cover data with aquatic data to have a more comprehensive effort for looking at fishery habitat needs in the large river and nearshore areas. It was noted that efforts in the Muskegon River area are doing that, but it is unclear whether this will be part of other pilot projects.

Barbara Avers of the MDNR, Wildlife Division, filling in for Amy Derosier, provided a summary on the Michigan Wildlife Action Plan (WAP), which outlines steps needed to protect wildlife and habitat before they become rare or endangered. Michigan's plan is more than 1,500 pages long — representing a state of the knowledge of the state's habitat needs. The latest plan is updated through 2005. The plan provides a tool for anyone interested in habitat, including private landowners as well as public land managers. A total of 404 species have been identified in the WAP, includes all federal and state listed species, as well as species of special concern identified by the Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI), as well as additional species of low or declining populations or whose populations are otherwise at risk. The state is pursuing a collaborative approach to implement the WAP.

The MDNR is developing its 5-year priorities for several general topic areas, including landscape features, threats and conservation actions. There is little current funding to implement the WAP and financial resources over the foreseeable future are uncertain. More information on state wildlife priorities can be found at: www.michigan.gov/dnrwildlifeactionplan. A question was raised about how the state is coordinating the WAP with the MI Great Lakes Restoration Plan. State representatives noted that the Restoration Plan was developed with input from the DNR staff that

developed the WAP. One participant expressed a desire to see greater coordination and collaboration among the two plans and see that directive come from high levels within the DNR and DEQ on how to implement these plans.

Another suggestion was made that the MDNR could advance some of the WAP goals by partnering with other state agencies that have some overlap, such as that state tourism office. The Pure Michigan Campaign was identified as one mechanism for doing this. The MDNR Parks Division just hired a new recreation coordinator who would like to hear more ideas about how to link state wildlife protection goals with recreation opportunities. It was also noted that there is a new biodiversity initiative which should dovetail with the WAP.

Roger Gauthier of the GLC provided an overview of the Great Lakes Habitat Initiative (GLHI) projects repository and funding data base. The stimulus funding coming out of the federal government with its demand for “shovel ready” projects has greatly increased the relevance of the project repository. It also served as a place to share information about funding. The GLC recently emailed all of the project contacts in the repository to notify them a NOAA funding opportunity. The repository is a place where agencies can go to find projects that are ready to begin. However, the repository currently holds an estimated fraction of the total number of potential habitat projects in the Great Lakes basin. The importance of adding additional projects and of updating project records for each project was emphasized.

Amy Beyer of the Conservation Resource Alliance (CRA) provided an overview of the structure and activities of the Healing Our Waters (HOW) Coalition. HOW has been actively advocating for appropriate authorization and appropriation levels from Congress. The CRA maintains its “River Care” program operating in 15 Northwest Michigan watersheds, which has identified over 3,300 potential ecological protection/restoration projects. The CRA works on an approach which networks stakeholders in project implementation.

Dave Brakhage of Ducks Unlimited provided an overview of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan’s Joint Ventures model and how a similar approach could be used to implement the GLRC recommendations. The NAWMP has broad goals with focus areas just like the GLRC. The Joint Ventures model uses a hierarchical committee approach. A joint ventures approach could include a regional organization to provide overarching planning and oversight, while local implementation committees could undertake the necessary ground work. This model would provide inherent accountability and feedback to state and regional stakeholders. Michigan has its own Great Lakes Restoration Plan, but priorities need to be set and action plans and feedback loops/accounting mechanisms still need to be developed. People need to be tasked with overseeing implementation in order to be successful. State implementation committees could be the counterpart to the GLRC habitat/species work group. Then, at the local level, there are local implementation groups that do the on-the-ground work. Existing local groups including non-profits, watershed councils and others, like the Northwest Michigan Resource Conservation and Development for example, could serve this function. There’s not a need to create new local groups where they currently exist.

Chris Frieberger of the MDNR Fisheries Division discussed restoration of streams and rivers and how there is always some disequilibrium between flows and sediment transport. He pointed out that anytime a stream or river is modified, it will try to get back to a state of dynamic equilibrium. He described the Dimondale Dam Restoration Project on the Grand River and the challenges that occurred with dam removal on this river. The dam was already breached causing sediment buildup and souring immediately downstream of the dam. Full dam removal actually required filling in part of a wetland to control sediment flow, and to mitigate other destabilizing impacts of the dam removal. In order to protect and enhance wetlands, the river channel had to be modified, including filling of some existing wetlands, to simulate a more natural dynamic equilibrium throughout the river. This approach made sense biologically and geomorphically, but not from a regulatory standpoint (which prohibits wetlands filling).

The desire to maintain wetlands functions has focused almost exclusively on avoiding adverse wetland impacts; including mitigation by restoring wetlands at alternative sites. It is not unusual for a wetland mitigation project to change stream dynamics affecting downstream wetlands. In some cases to enhance or restore a stream's ecological function, it may be necessary to fill selected wetlands here or there to create more sustainable wetlands elsewhere within the stream complex to achieve a higher overall ecological function. In other words, it may be necessary to fill some wetlands in order to restore and stabilize the stream channel after a dam is removed. Regulators need to view such losses against the overall stream benefits expected to be achieved, and not treat restoration activities identically to typical development project (i.e. housing, roads, industrial etc.). (Note: There was a similar discussion at the Ohio workshop, where there are new conflicts occurring between "hard-wired" wetlands regulations and the latest ecological science for restoring streams and rivers.) The USACE policy still requires "no net loss of wetlands." This issue is not a unique MDEQ problem, but an evolving national transformation in thinking. The MDEQ has streamlined its permitting process for shoreline treatment when green or soft engineering is part of the activity. Their experience in this regard could be a model for others, particularly for other public entities with a land conservation mandate.

Ernie Kafcas of the MDNR Wildlife Division discussed activities underway in the lakes Huron to Erie Corridor including Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair delta and its significant ecological contribution to this waterway. He discussed state and local efforts to control Phragmites, an aggressive invasive plant that is colonizing large expanses of the delta, choking off ecological functions of wetlands throughout the region. Mr. Kafcas described three Phragmites control sites in Anchor Bay — on the northwestern portion of Lake St. Clair. The biggest challenge that exists is inadequate funding to initiate control programs and maintain them over long periods of time. The MDNR has a good handle on the threat of Phragmites encroachment and a good handle on how to manage this situation. To get funds, partnerships need to be developed that require substantial time commitments before the partners can go after grant opportunities. Success depends on leveraging people and the funding they bring into the project. Another significant challenge is to get local landowners and stakeholder to buy in to a long term funding commitment, especially when private land is involved adjacent to where control work is underway. The coastal community needs to find ways to lower costs of long term control and monitoring of nuisance species eradication/control projects.

Group Discussion:

After the formal presentations were made a group discussion was conducted to identify key obstacles that exist to implementing habitat restoration projects, or at the minimum provides substantial challenges to action. A discussion revolved around whether there was conflicting interests at play in implementing restoration projects in Michigan. The general consensus was that MI state agencies have been working very well with each other to implement projects, but funding is always limiting success. For example, planning for the Dimondale dam removal project involved regulatory, wildlife and fishery staff at key points along the way. Generally there are few if any legislative restrictions in place that compromise or impede implementation of restoration projects. There is an overt desire to adapt regulatory objectives to evolving scientific knowledge of ecological processes.

Other challenges were identified, which included:

- Current shortfalls in staffing at state agencies is impeding implementation of restoration plans and could get a lot worse over the immediate future due to budget cut-backs;
- State contracting procedures have impeded efficient use of funds to implement restoration projects, specifically those dealing with natural stream restoration projects; Restoration funding under Section 319 and the recent Clean Michigan Initiative have largely been unavailable to NGOs to participate in;
- Clear measures of success (metrics) have not always been in place;
- Accountability is a huge responsibility of stakeholders;
- The operation and maintenance of restoration projects over the long-term need to be factored in and be well documented, especially when it deals with controlling aggressive invasive species;
- Continued emphasis needs to be placed on streamlining federal and state permitting practices to facilitate restoration activities, particularly to take advantage of short-term funding opportunities;
- Technical assistance from various federal and state agencies is often needed, although there is not always good knowledge of available resources; it was noted that the GLHI database does identify programs that provide this type of assistance from federal agencies.
- Finally it was noted that the MI Office of the Great Lakes needs to support long-term implementation planning and coordination of stakeholders, since restoration projects typically require multi-year commitments; continued interagency collaboration is critical to successful implementation of restoration plans.