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***Wisconsin Wetlands Association Testimony on SB 661  
Submitted April 8, 2010 by Policy Director, Erin O'Brien***

*Wisconsin Wetlands Association is dedicated to the protection, restoration and enjoyment of wetlands and associated ecosystems through science-based programs, education and advocacy. WWA is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.*

Wisconsin Wetlands Association is here to register our strong support for this bill and to ask the members of this committee to do everything they can to ensure it is passed through both arms of the legislature and enacted into law this session.

The purpose of this bill is very simple. It authorizes the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to create a streamlined permit review and approval process for wetland restoration projects sponsored and built by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Today you will hear from several agencies and non-profit organizations that provide wetland restoration services to Wisconsin's private landowners, so I will leave it to them to describe the nature of the permitting problems that they have encountered and that this bill aims to address. Instead, I will talk about the opportunity it offers.

Nearly 50% of Wisconsin's wetlands (~5 million acres) have been lost to drainage or development. Most of this occurred before our nation understood the critical water quality improvement, flood abatement, wildlife habitat, and other services that wetlands provide. Today these public benefits are more widely recognized and, fortunately, some of these losses are reversible. Landowners interested in restoring wetlands can also receive technical assistance and cost-share dollars through programs run by federal and state agencies and non-profit organizations.

75% of the remaining wetlands in the state are privately owned and the percentage of restoreable wetlands in private ownership is likely greater. Many of these lands are owned by farmers facing decisions on what to do with their land when they retire.

Though my organization does not restore wetlands directly, a major emphasis of our policy work is to help remove barriers to wetland restoration. This includes working to ensure that restoring wetlands is an economically viable option for interested landowners and that the agencies and organizations that do this important work have the tools and resources they need to be successful. So, for example, when Wisconsin farmers could no longer receive a fair price to restore wetlands on their property through the Wetlands

Reserve Program (WRP) due to changes in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's land appraisal methodologies, we worked with partners in Washington D.C. to secure a fix. The remedy enabled Wisconsin WRP to go from restoring only 700 wetland acres in 2007, to 7,353 acres in 2009. I share this to demonstrate the dramatic difference wetland restoration policies can have on our landscape.

A conservative estimate of the federal dollars available annually for wetland restoration in Wisconsin is \$20 million, but it can be much more, or much less depending upon how well we compete for those dollars against other states. Occasionally we also have the opportunity to compete for new pots of restoration funds. For example, Wisconsin brought in \$19.7 million in stimulus money to restore floodplain wetlands on agricultural lands that suffered crop damages during the 2008 floods. I should add that there was so much landowner interest in this program that Wisconsin NRCS could have spent more than \$60 million had the funds been available.

The most promising current opportunity for supplemental federal funds is through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative which will allocate \$300-\$475 million in federal funds annually for the next 5 years for ecosystem restoration projects, including wetlands. I believe the U.S. Department of Interior has already received supplemental funds for some of their programs that restore wetlands.

AB 852 acknowledges the role that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service play as partners in Wisconsin's efforts to restore wetlands to our landscape. Their services are rendered by experienced biologists, including some of the best wetland restoration professionals in the state if not the nation. We should be doing everything we can to support and expedite their work.

The permitting concerns we're discussing today are just one of the barriers that interfere with our ability to restore wetlands in Wisconsin. The fact that landowners are subject to a property tax penalty (sometimes substantial) when they restore wetlands in agricultural landscapes is another that is ripe for legislative action. We believe the Wisconsin legislature is committed to the protection and restoration of wetlands and we greatly appreciate all of the actions you have already taken in support of this cause.

We look forward to working with you to address these concerns and again encourage you to take swift action on SB 661.

*Questions about these comments should be directed to Wisconsin Wetlands Association's Policy Director, Erin O'Brien at 608-250-9971 / [erin.obrien@wisconsinwetlands.org](mailto:erin.obrien@wisconsinwetlands.org).*