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## **Detroit River conservation initiatives to be recognized at White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation**

DETROIT – Over the past several years, a unique coalition of community, business, education and governmental groups have quietly endeavored to revitalize the Detroit River and its surrounding areas. As a result of this collaboration, the 32-mile waterway that connects Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie, once neglected and polluted, has become an inviting place for wildlife and a destination for the public. The partnerships that have made this transformation possible will receive national recognition at the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation in St. Louis Aug. 29-Aug. 31.

The Detroit River initiative is among 37 conservation projects nationwide that will be highlighted at the conference. An overview of the initiative will be presented by Mary Bohling, environmental planner, DTE Energy; Barry Murray, Southeast Michigan extension agent, Michigan Sea Grant; Anita Twardesky, co-chair, Downriver Linked Greenways; and John Hartig, manager, Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge. The four represent a cross-section of the many organizations that have been deeply involved in the revitalization of the Detroit River.

On a recent visit to Detroit, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Steve Johnson praised the work done by these organizations to restore and protect the Detroit River watershed. According to Johnson, these community-based public and private partnerships have made the Detroit River once again a gathering place for wildlife and families and will serve as a collaborative model for the rest of the nation at the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation.

The conference, convened by the White House Council on Environmental Quality, will focus on promoting cooperative conservation through partnerships with state, tribal and local governments, communities, private for-profit and non-profit organizations, and private citizens. It will bring together interested participants and decision makers who can advance cooperative conservation and identify ideas for future conservation and environmental policies and initiatives.

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“We are honored to be invited to the conference and delighted to have the opportunity to share our achievements with our colleagues from across the country. We’re anxious to learn from them as well,” said Bohling. “This conference is about collaboration, and from our experiences with the Detroit River, that truly is the way you make things happen.”

Some of the numerous partnerships and projects that have helped revitalize the Detroit River area include:

- **The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.** Located along the lower Detroit River and western shoreline of Lake Erie, the 2,400-acre Refuge contains islands, coastal wetlands, marshes, shoals and unique uplands, and includes four DTE Energy facilities that are certified wildlife sites, due in large part to the conservation efforts of DTE Energy volunteers. The company recently donated \$100,000 to help build a gateway at the refuge that will include a visitor center, wildlife viewing stations, hiking trails and more.
- **The Downriver Linked Greenways.** This organization has raised more than \$10 million for trail construction and has built nearly 15 miles of trails since 1999. It has completed a five-year master plan, and worked with the National Park Service to create a signage manual.
- **The Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative of the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition.** The initiative raised \$43 million for projects involving environmental stewardship, economic development, and celebrating history and culture.
- **The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy.** The group raised more than \$100 million that leveraged millions of dollars more to build the 3.5-mile Detroit RiverWalk, one of the country’s largest urban waterfront redevelopment projects.
- **The Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan GreenWays Initiative.** This effort provided \$25 million and leveraged another \$65 million for communities to build greenways.

“Today, because of these partnerships, the river is cleaner. Bald eagles have returned to the watershed and lake sturgeon are spawning again. Peregrine falcons have come back from the brink of extinction and common terns are recovering,” said Hartig. “Children and families are visiting wildlife areas and learning how to become the next generation of conservation stewards.

“The more than five million people who live in the Detroit metropolitan area now have opportunities to experience nature they would not have had,” he added. “Collaborative conservation has made a difference in our quality of life and, bottom line, that’s given communities and businesses here a tremendous competitive advantage.”

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