



## **Waterbird Conservation Council** Involvement in Advocacy and Public Policy

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### **Introduction**

Advocacy is defined as “the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy” or “active support.” The Council is by its very nature an advocacy group, in that it actively supports waterbird conservation.

Support of waterbird conservation can take many forms, and the Council has identified involvement in public policy as an important role for itself. Public policy is “expressed in the body of laws, regulations, decisions and actions of government or public authorities.”

The term advocacy is also used to describe organized and intentional activities to bring about change, with these activities being in support of, or opposition to, one side of an often controversial issue. It is this possible controversy, as well as public or governmental aspects of many conservation issues, which makes it important to specify the Council’s approach to advocacy.

### **Considerations with Regard to Involvement in Public Policy**

As the Council evolves, its membership should increasingly include individuals able to directly influence conservation issues and public policy. In fact, the strength of the Council arises from the individual members and their affiliated organizations (for this reason Council letterhead has listed members along its margin.) However, the Council is intended to be an autonomous entity, with individual members are committed to expanding the influence and credibility of the Council. Moreover, the paramount value that the Council places on waterbird conservation can conflict or compete with other values, such as economic growth, human access and recreation, or land development – values that members’ affiliated organizations may also promote or support.

The Council has the responsibility for voicing the interests of waterbirds on public policy issues of significance to waterbird conservation at a large scale (i.e., national scale or greater). However, the Council may choose to concern itself with any issue regardless of scale if it results in positive benefits to waterbird conservation or their habitats. The positions that the Council takes must be consistent with the recommendations of the continental-scale North American Waterbird Conservation Plan and annual Council workplans. A public policy action may take many forms, such as a letter to appropriate decision-makers advocating a position, testimony, publicity on the Initiative’s website or in other communications, or initiating and implementing a Council campaign. In some cases, an alternative to Council action might be to recommend activities for adoption by individual Council members and their affiliated institutions.



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Council involvement in public policy activities should be positive and pro-active. Statements or information provided by the Council should be based on science and advocate for the interests of waterbirds, and not advocate against other interests. Further, as the Council is an international body, it must be sensitive to the fact that statements to government organizations may be viewed as “foreign” intervention. In general, the Council’s involvement in public policy should be conducted in a fashion appropriate to the nature of the Council as a voluntary, partnership-based board without collective public authority.

Given the complex and myriad effects of public policy on waterbird populations and habitats, it is in the Council’s best interest to proactively manage how it invests time and effort into public policy involvement. It is the role of the Policy and Critical Issues Committee to scope out the Council’s interests and priorities, identifying those issues and actions which are most appropriate for the Council’s engagement, significant for conservation, and likely to be effective.

### **Process for Involvement in Public Policy**

Some issues may require rapid action on the part of the Council, thus the process for involvement must be expedient.

Requests for a public policy related action from the Council can be initiated by a Council member, a Council committee, a regional working group, or any other individual or organizational partner in the Waterbird Conservation for the Americas initiative.

Requests for public policy actions are vetted by a specific subgroup of the Council, the Policy and Critical Issues Committee (or lacking that, the Executive Committee) responsible for assessing what involvement, and in what form, the Council should have in specific public policy issues and making recommendations to the Executive Committee and then full Council.

Information will be obtained from a proponent that allows careful consideration of the merits of the requested public policy action. Pertinent information may include: description of issue (including scope), identification of stakeholders, rationale for adopting recommended action, rationale of opponents to recommended action, contacts representing diverse positions on issue, and anticipated benefits of Council action. If appropriate to Council action, the Policy and Critical Issues Committee will evaluate the proposal with regard to potential conflicts for Council Members and develop a course of action likely to accrue the maximum benefit while minimizing difficulties for Council Members. The Policy and Critical Issues Committee will balance the strength of adopting a public policy action that involves entire Council (which may be broad) against the strength of recommending specific conservation actions that only a portion of the Council can advance through their affiliated institutions.



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Recommendations on activities pertaining to public policy will be shared with full Council, both to garner their support and to allow any member the opportunity to raise objections or disengage himself/herself from the activity. (Some members of Council are required by their employers to avoid making individual statements regarding public policies or issues.) Under no circumstances will a public policy action be advanced on behalf of the Council without the full notification of its members. **(See Decision Making Document).** In cases of objection or abstention, a record will be kept of member responses. In general, the Council will strive for the most effective public policy action that can be fully supported by the membership, but if not fully supported, the following or a similar statement will be appropriately conveyed with the action:

*The Waterbird Conservation Council is a voluntary board with a geographically and organizationally diverse membership, unified in a shared vision of sustained or restored distribution, diversity, and abundance of waterbird populations and habitats in the Americas. With some members potentially abstaining, the position presented here is determined by Council as a whole to be in the best interests of waterbird conservation.*

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