



**Save The River's Opening Statement for International Joint Commissioners' Visit
John Peach, Executive Director and Upper St. Lawrence Riverkeeper
Friday, June 28, 2019**

Opening

On behalf of Save The River, the Upper St. Lawrence Riverkeeper, I welcome the Commissioners of the International Joint Commission to Clayton and the 1000 Islands. Thank you for making the journey to one of the most beautiful and environmentally sensitive regions of North America. And thank you to Congresswoman Stefanik for supporting Plan 2014 since its inception, and for joining us via video conference today.

Save The River has been the region's environmental leader for 41 years – working to restore, preserve, and protect the Upper St. Lawrence River now and for generations to come. We envision passing down a swimmable, drinkable, and fishable River to our children and grandchildren. Throughout the past four decades, we have developed a diverse set of programs that currently include: Advocating to block the spread of invasive species including Asian Carp, expanding our *Replace Single-Use Plastics* on both sides of the River, restoring habitat for a New York State threatened species: common terns, monitoring water quality at several swimming sites, Catch and Release programs to protect the future our Muskie and Bass fisheries, and educating River residents and local officials on issues affecting the St. Lawrence River environment and **annually** educating 1,500 K-12 North Country students about the importance of a healthy River environment.

Save The River works with partners to promote community resiliency in response to variations in water levels and climate change. We are a member of the St. Lawrence River Advisory Council for the St. Lawrence River Watershed Revitalization Plan (SLRWRP). Encompassing eight counties and nearly 5,600 square miles of land, the SLRWRP is working to develop a watershed revitalization plan using an ecosystem-based management approach focusing on:

- Implementing 'Smart growth' in watershed and waterfront communities
- Maintaining agriculture and working landscapes
- Increasing awareness of how human actions affect the lands and waters
- Preparing for impacts of a changing climate

History of Support for Plan 2014

Over the course of many years, Save The River helped lead the effort to address the shortcomings and damage created by the previous water level management plan. We were joined by our partners at The Nature Conservancy, Audubon New York, Ducks Unlimited, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, Ducks Unlimited Canada, World Wildlife Foundation Canada, and American Rivers.

As many of you know, this team's efforts in support of Plan 2014 were further bolstered by:

- Over 36,000 written expressions of citizen support,
- letters from 59 environmental, conservation and sportsmen organizations

- letters from 39 businesses and community leaders including the Business Council of New York, and
- 21 municipal and county resolutions

Description of Current Situation

Across much of the United States we are now experiencing significant flooding brought on by extraordinarily high precipitation that impacts all portions of our watershed, especially the lakeshore where homes and properties were constructed within the flood zone.

In light of this disruption, several points are important to remember:

- First, the Lake Ontario and the upper St. Lawrence River coastline would have seen similar water level increases under the previous management plan, 1958D. We know this because of the monitoring data collected by the IJC and its partners. Enhanced monitoring is a key element of Plan 2014 and the basis for any Plan adjustments that may be called for.
- Second, Plan 2014 is actually a more robust plan and allows for deviations during episodic changes, like the one we see today. For example, throughout the late summer and fall of 2018, flows were almost certainly higher than they would have been under the previous plan. The rules and provisions of Plan 2014 enabled setting and maintaining recent record or near record outflows.
- Third, restrictions on releases under both plans seek to balance the interests of the watershed's ecology, Ontario lakeshore, upper St. Lawrence River, and the lower river shore. This includes areas like Montreal that are prone to flooding, too.
- And finally, to reemphasize a most important point, the differences between Plan 2014 and the previous plan are not the cause of recent historic high-water levels.

Key Facts Supporting Plan 2014

As the IJC contemplates reacting to the significant short-term rise in water levels we must not lose sight of one clear fact: ***The science continues to support Plan 2014 and the long-term benefits it provides.***

This includes:

- **The Wet Meadow**
The wet meadow is a major component of coastal wetlands, and its status tells us a great deal about the condition of the wetland ecosystem as a whole.
 - The old water management plan reduced wet meadow acreage by 50%
 - Plan 2014 is projected to increase wet meadow acreage by 40% from those seen under 1958D

- **Northern Pike**

The Northern Pike is one of the top predators in coastal marshes. Their reduction affects the entire food chain and ecosystem.

- The old water management plan reduced Northern Pike populations by 70%
- Plan 2014 is projected to increase Northern Pike populations by 39% from those seen under 1958D

Our partners at SUNY ESF report they have already seen significant increase in natural reproduction of Pike.

- **Black Terns**

Marsh-nesting birds like Black Terns depend on diverse marshes interspersed with open water for nesting. New Yorkers spend \$660 million each year on trips within the state for wildlife viewing.

- The old water management plan reduced Black Tern populations by 80%
- Plan 2014 is projected to increase Tern populations by 16% from those seen under 1958D.

Plan 2014 also includes significant economic benefits for New York State.

- **Recreation and Economy**

Plan 2014 extends the recreational boating season by several weeks into the fall. This is critical for our local economies.

In fact, healthier Lake and River wetlands support stronger populations of native fish and wildlife, improving the area's hunting, angling, and wildlife-viewing opportunities. The Nature Conservancy estimated economic benefits from Plan 2014, just from improved wildlife recreation, of \$4.0 million - \$9.1 million per year for the immediate river economy.

- **Hydropower**

Hydro-electricity production increases by a projected \$5.3 million a year under Plan 2014. This low-cost power supports jobs in New York State.

- **Shoreline Resiliency**

Compared to the cost of protecting properties from erosion and flooding under unregulated conditions, Plan 2014 is estimated to save property owners on the lake \$25.2 million dollars a year. This may be \$2.2 million less than savings under the previous plan, but the figure remains very significant.

Conclusion

Save The River supports the River's environment through scientific research, education, and advocacy. The science resulting from a six-year, \$20 million study clearly supported Plan 2014. The Plan includes an adaptive management process but recognizes that the environmental



benefits to the Lake and River may take up to 15 years to be achieved, a short time to turn around generations of environmental damage.

Any modifications to Plan 2014 should be made based on facts, not emotion. We ask that as Commissioners listen to residents' concerns about water levels, that they ask for facts that support the assumption that Plan 1958 would do a better job than Plan 2014 controlling the high water.

We ask that the Commissioners have their technical staff run a simulation of 2019's conditions using the criteria of Plan 1958D and make the results of the simulation available for public review.

We also ask that the IJC Commissioners recognize the following resolution in support of Plan 2014:

"Save The River will defend Plan 2014 - In 2016 Save The River achieved a decades-long goal when the U.S., Canada, and the International Joint Commission approved Plan 2014, a modern water levels plan, for Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. In order for the Plan to achieve the many environmental and economic benefits its implementation will bring, Save The River must continue to vigorously defend it. Save The River will continue to participate in the adaptive management process set out in the Plan to ensure its projected benefits are achieved and unforeseen, but mitigable impacts, are addressed based on sound science and sound principles of sustainability."

Save The River asks that the International Joint Commission continue Plan 2014 and its adaptive management process as long as sound science and sound principles of sustainability determine Plan 2014 is the right water levels management plan for Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

We recognize that residents of Lake Ontario are suffering the ill effects of the extraordinary snow melt and rain fall of 2019, just as they did in 2017. But please remember that we on the St. Lawrence River are suffering equally. Many of our businesses are underwater. Those businesses must face the added burden of lost sales in what is always a short season at best. Many of our residential properties are underwater. Homeowners are contemplating making the same repairs they made in 2017. The river is suffering. Tourism is down. Spending is down. Housing sales are depressed. And yet, the river community supports plan 2014.

Before we hear comments from members of Save The River's Plan 2014 working group and local elected officials, I would like to offer the Commissioners and Congresswoman Stefanik the opportunity to speak and make comments.