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Local Wetlands Protected, Amplify Regional Effort to Improve Lake Erie Water Quality

Norvell Township, Michigan – October 14, 2026 –Legacy Land Conservancy has permanently protected 28.5 acres of wetlands and forest in Norvell Township, adding to a growing network of conserved lands near the headwaters of the River Raisin.

The Watters project, located in the southeast corner of Jackson County within the River Raisin Watershed, provides local water-quality benefits that extend downriver to Lake Erie, where harmful algal blooms continue to threaten drinking water, recreation, and wildlife.

According to a 2022 study commissioned by the former Michigan United Conservation Clubs and undertaken by Michigan State University researchers, western Lake Erie harmful algal blooms in 2019 had an estimated $2.9-to-$5.9-million-dollar negative economic impact on fishing and hunting-related regional revenue.

Harmful algal blooms in western Lake Erie are fueled by excess nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen entering waterways through runoff and wastewater. These blooms threaten drinking water, recreation, wildlife and local economies. Wetlands help reduce those impacts by naturally filtering water and absorbing excess nutrients before they reach larger waterways.

“What happens on the land directly impacts our water, and water doesn’t stop at property lines,” Legacy Land Conservancy Executive Director Diana Kern said. “When we protect wetlands near the headwaters of the River Raisin, we’re improving the overall health of the watershed and the Great Lakes Basin, helping water quality for communities downriver all the way to Lake Erie.”

This wetland project is one local action within a much larger Lake Erie watershed-wide approach to improving water quality.

Though smaller in size, the Watters project adds to over a thousand acres of private and public preserve lands–including Watkins Lake State Park and Vineyard Lake County Park–in the area already conserved.

Permanent protection of the Watters conservation easement and other similar properties is an essential part of reducing harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie. Its wetlands and forest act like natural filters and sponges capturing excess nutrients, slowing water, and improving water quality for the community of Brooklyn, larger Norvell Township, and the River Raisin Watershed which empties into Lake Erie.

“Protecting land and specifically wetlands in the River Raisin Watershed is a critical part of the broader regional water quality strategy,” stated Ducks Unlimited Water Quality Biologist Matthew Conrad. “Protection and enhancement of wetlands provide a nature-based solution to benefit downstream communities and reduce algal blooms in Lake Erie.”

The landowners–Brian and Lisa Waters–are extremely pleased to protect their properties' valuable wetland areas and ensure the quality and quantity of water resources within the River Raisin Watershed via a conservation easement with Legacy, which offers permanent protection of privately-owned land.

The Waters were inspired to protect their land in early 2023 while attending a Washtenaw County Conservation Collective meeting in Manchester Township where Legacy Land Conservancy presented. Following the presentation, they connected with Legacy Land Conservancy.

After learning that Legacy's service area also includes Jackson County and that there was a funding opportunity available for wetland properties, the Waters turned their attention to their Jackson County property–which supports habitat for rare, endangered, or threatened species of animals, fish, plants, and fungi including cream wild indigo (state endangered), Mitchell's satyr butterfly (federal and state endangered), eastern massasauga (state special concern), and spotted turtle (state threatened).

"I've been watching the land around us get subdivided and developed over the years and it's heartbreaking," landowner Brian Waters said. "I'm thrilled that with Legacy's help we're able to protect our land and preserve its open space and wildlife habitat, forever."

Shortly after Legacy met with Brian and Lisa, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Ducks Unlimited announced a newly launched limited two-year grant opportunity through the Wetland Conservation Program using American Rescue Plan Act funds, creating a rare chance to move the project quickly.

The Wetland Conservation Program was looking for local municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and private landowners interested in taking action to restore and conserve wetlands on their property in an effort to improve drinking water, reduce harmful algal blooms, and protect wildlife habitat in Lake Erie and Saginaw Bay watersheds.

"From the initial inquiry in 2023 to the purchased easement in 2026, the Watters property was completed in three years," Land Protection Director Susan LaCroix said. "This timeline is on the shorter end of our range for purchased easements and is unique in the current funding landscape."

The total cost to purchase and protect the Watters conservation easement was $150,000. In addition to American Rescue Plan Act funds, additional resources to purchase the conservation easement from the landowners were secured in partnership with the Carls Foundation.

For the Waters family, this project is only the beginning. Using part of the conservation easement proceeds, they have plans to purchase and conserve more wetland and farmland along the River Raisin near Manchester. This will continue to build on the water quality work Legacy and its partners are doing in the River Raisin watershed.

About Legacy Land Conservancy:
Founded in 1971 as Michigan's first local land trust, Legacy is a nonprofit conservation organization that protects land in southern Michigan. Legacy's mission is to safeguard Michigan's land and water to support diverse, resilient, and thriving communities–forever. Legacy has helped to protect more than 11,000 acres of land, including eight nature preserves open for all to enjoy. In a testament to 55 years of successful voluntary conservation, Legacy is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission for adhering to a set of standards designed to ensure the organization's work will endure forever. Legacy is based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For more information, visit www.legacylandconservancy.org

Wetlands Conservation Program:
Ducks Unlimited, in partnership with Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, and Department of Agriculture & Rural Development created the Wetlands Conservation Program (WCP) using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act. The purpose of the WCP is to provide funding to assist with wetland acquisition, engineering, conservation, restoration, or enhancement in the Lake Erie and Saginaw Bay watersheds to improve water quality, enhance wildlife and aquatic habitat, and to support and enhance Great Lakes tourism and related economic sectors. Currently, the WCP is funding 15 projects throughout Saginaw Bay and Lake Erie watersheds to protect, enhance, and restore over 1,300 acres of wetlands and associated habitats.

About Michigan Department of Natural Resources:
The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is committed to the conservation, protection, management, use and enjoyment of the state's natural and cultural resources for current and future generations. https://www.michigan.gov/dnr

About Ducks Unlimited:
Ducks Unlimited conserves, restores, and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people. Waterfowl conservation is facing important challenges as wetlands and other habitats are being degraded and destroyed across the continent. Ducks Unlimited has a vision to reverse this trend. https://www.ducks.org/about-ducks-unlimited

About Washtenaw County Conservation Collective:
The Washtenaw County Conservation Collective is comprised of the Washtenaw County Conservation District (WCCD), Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission, Legacy Land Conservancy, River Raisin Watershed Council, Ann Arbor Greenbelt, and the Huron River Watershed Council, who work together towards a common goal of conservation in Washtenaw County. The Conservation Collective created a Land Toolkit for landowners to find the right resources and connect to local organizations that can help assess, manage, and preserve their land. https://washtenawcd.org/landtoolkit

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