Oneida Lake Association, Inc., P.O. Box 3536, Syracuse, N.Y. 13220
http://oneidalakeassociation.org

April 22, 2009

Mr. Thomas Vilsack
Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-9338

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write on behalf of the nearly 4,000 members of the Oneida Lake Association (OLA) and all constituents whose lives are enriched by Oneida Lake. We are grateful for the successful double-crested cormorant management program led by USDA APHIS Wildlife Services. Their work saves our regional economy and fishing traditions from disaster.

We hope you will continue to prioritize the maintenance of Wildlife Services' Oneida Lake management efforts at levels that have proven effective. We also hope that Wildlife Services will have the opportunity to extend their management of this nuisance species throughout its range.

Oneida Lake is the largest and most important lake to lie entirely within New York. Its world-class walleye and yellow perch fishing are critical to our quality of life, heritage, and economy. About 80 percent of angler effort on Oneida Lake is focused on walleye and perch, and these anglers generate millions of dollars in spending and support thousands of jobs.

Oneida Lake's cormorant population exploded in the 1990s. At their peak, the birds ate an estimated 2.8 million game fish per year. Our colleagues at Cornell University, keepers of one of the world's best long-term fishery datasets, documented losses so great that walleye and yellow perch populations may never recover to pre-cormorant levels. Cormorants also destroyed vital habitat for common terns, an endangered species that has traditionally nested here.

Cormorants created an economic disaster for a struggling upstate New York economy. For example, when cormorant population growth was accelerating, the number of licenses purchased by non-resident anglers in the region crashed from about 65,000 to 15,000 annually. Millions of dollars and thousands of jobs disappeared.

Relief came when a broad coalition of community stakeholders and agencies set consensus goals for cormorant suppression. These included the aim of reducing cormorants' harm to Oneida Lake without shifting the nuisance to other nearby fisheries. Wildlife Services has implemented

management activities since 2004, effectively preserving this increasingly delicate ecosystem and angling economy.

Oneida Lake's walleye and perch populations have slowly begun to rebound, and the fishery's reputation has improved. The B.A.S.S. organization proclaimed Oneida Lake a "jewel" during its nationally televised events here, giving high profile praise to Wildlife Services and OLA.

Research by economists at the National Wildlife Research Center credits Oneida Lake management efforts with an annual return on investment of $13 to $48 for every $1 spent. Conservative assessments show that improved fishing has protected at least 1,400 local jobs and $47,000,000 in angler-related spending—local jobs and dollars that are more critical than ever.

It is clear that USDA has made a tremendous difference, and Wildlife Services' continued management of the cormorant population is critical to maintaining these benefits moving forward. Reduced effort invites the return of cormorants. When budget challenges forced Wildlife Services to reduce harassment activities last year, cormorant numbers increased by 12 percent on Oneida Lake. Cornell biologists maintain that our fishery cannot sustain the damage that would occur if cormorant numbers were to persist above target levels.

We have seen the USDA Wildlife Services cormorant program budget cut by 25 percent and 9 percent in 2008 and 2009, respectively. We are concerned about this year's budget uncertainty, because we believe that our fishery may be lost without sustainable funding for Wildlife Services' activities here. We hope this program's funding will be robust and reliable.

We appreciate the job USDA has done to suppress Oneida Lake's cormorant populations without creating a problem somewhere else. In the field of nuisance animal management, this broad and effective collaboration is a model success story. Therefore, we ask you to make every effort to provide sustainable funding for Wildlife Services' work here, and that you promote opportunities for Wildlife Services to partner in management of cormorants throughout their range.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests.

Gratefully,

The Oneida Lake Association
Board of Directors

Cc:

Martin Lowney
New York State Director
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services

Pete Grannis
Commissioner
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Christopher Horton
Conservation Director
B.A.S.S.