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Watershed group reflects on 2020 policy successes

The following guest commentary was submitted by Jen DeMoss, communications director at Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

As with the rest of our community, the state, and the country, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council has grappled with the unprecedented challenges presented by COVID-19.

Like many businesses and nonprofits, our vital programs have been disrupted and daily operations altered — all in the context of tremendous and extraordinary uncertainty. For the watershed council's policy team, we went from walking the halls of Congress during Great Lakes Day in Washington, D.C., to working remotely. This has meant presenting testimony and participating in public hearings virtually, engaging with lawmakers and decision-makers via email or the phone, and spending hundreds of hours on Zoom calls. But despite the difficulties that have come with conducting our work in the midst of a global pandemic, we achieved a number of accomplishments in 2020.

Stopping water shutoffs

The watershed council, along with partners from across the state, helped Senator Stephanie Chang pass the Water Shutoff Restoration Act. The bill promotes access to clean water and protects Michiganders from the spread of COVID-19 by ensuring that every occupied residence has access to clean running water. It prohibits water shutoffs due to nonpayment and mandates that water services be restored to residences where shutoffs have occurred, in most circumstances, through March 31, 2021. While access to clean water is essential during the global pandemic, every Michigander should always have access to clean and affordable water and the watershed

council will continue to work towards these efforts.

Voter-approved referendum to protect water, wildlife, and parks

The watershed council was part of a broad and diverse coalition formed to encourage Michiganders to vote yes on Proposal 1. Proposal 1 was a ballot initiative, funded and led by the Michigan Environmental Council and The Nature Conservancy, to achieve two things: 1) ensure that all future state mineral royalties are dedicated to conservation and recreation and 2) require that at least 25% of expenditures of these funds are used for activities like building trails, restoring historic structures, or reclaiming land for urban parks so the public can use and enjoy these special places. At least 25% of the fund will continue to be used to acquire and protect lands. The proposal passed with 84% voter support. With its passage, we are protecting our beautiful and essential land, creating opportunities for all Michiganders to experience the great outdoors, and fostering an appreciation for Michigan's natural beauty in each successive generation.

Boost in Great Lakes restoration funding

In a major victory for the Great Lakes and clean water advocates, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2019 passed through Congress and was signed into law. The bill allows Congress to continue funding the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative for five years, and increases the program's annual funding from \$300 million to \$475 million by 2026. This is tremendous news for the more than 30 million people who rely on the Great Lakes for their drinking water, health, jobs, recreation, and quality of life.

New drinking water standards for PFAS

PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) are a large, complex, and ever-expanding group of manufactured chemicals widely used to make products like nonstick cookware, food packaging, stain-resistant carpet treatments, fire-fighting foam, and more. There are multiple potential health risks from exposure to PFAS chemicals, such as higher risk of certain cancers and impacts on the immune system. In response to inaction by the federal government, Michigan enacted new standards for seven PFAS compounds in drinking water — some of the toughest, most comprehensive standards on the chemicals anywhere in the country.

Gov. Whitmer orders shutdown of Line 5

Gov. Whitmer and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) revoked and terminated the 1953 easement allowing Enbridge to operate Line 5 in the Straits of Mackinac. The termination requires the pipeline to be shut down on May 12, 2021. This comes after the DNR spent more than a year looking into Enbridge's compliance with the 1953 easement and determined there are persistent and incurable violations. The DNR found that Enbridge failed to show "due care" while operating the pipeline, ignored pipeline support requirements for essentially the life of the easement, failed to address coating loss, and failed to comply with curvature requirements that can impact the structural integrity of the line. This is a historic win for the Great Lakes, our citizens, and our Northern Michigan economy.

This highlights just a few of our 2020 policy successes. We will continue this momentum in 2021. We will be a voice, an advocate, and on the front lines protecting our water resources, even if we have to do it remotely due a global pandemic.