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DEC ANNOUNCES CORMORANT MANAGEMENT PLANS Comprehensive Program Seeks to Reduce Conflicts With Fish and Other Wildlife

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Erin M. Crotty today announced plans to expand cormorant management efforts in New York State. DEC, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Wildlife Services program, will use a variety of measures to help reduce conflicts between double-crested cormorants and natural resources in the State. A new federal rule, adopted in October 2003, gave New York and other states greater authority to manage cormorants when needed to protect important natural resources.

“DEC is committed to curbing the negative impacts of large populations of cormorants,” Commissioner Crotty said. “DEC staff have developed a comprehensive plan that takes into consideration the diverse viewpoints about these birds, while protecting New York’s fish, wildlife, and habitat.”

Cormorants are large, fish-eating birds that nest “colonially” in areas with high fish abundance, often in the same habitats used by other colonial-nesting bird species. Colonial birds are species that nest in very high densities in relatively small areas, with as many as several thousand pairs nesting side-by-side. Nesting in colonies rather than in widely spaced territories allows birds to exploit an abundant food source and avoid predators, especially if suitable habitat exists on islands far from land. Cormorant populations have increased dramatically over the past 30 years to the point where they are now threatening other waterbird species and impacting important fisheries in several areas of New York.

Double-crested cormorants are native to North America, but were not known to nest in New York until 1945, when 14 nests were found on Gull Island in eastern Lake Ontario. The population has grown to more than 10,000 nesting pairs statewide, with an estimated summer population of more than 40,000 birds. The recent population growth is due to a combination of factors, including water quality improvements, an abundance of forage fish, and increased protection by an amendment to the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1972.

DEC has been involved in cormorant management for nearly a decade. Techniques such as egg-oiling, nest destruction, hazing, habitat modification, exclusion techniques, and occasional removal of cormorants have helped to reduce the impacts of these birds. However, additional efforts are needed to protect and restore important fish populations in eastern Lake Ontario and Oneida Lake, and to protect important bird populations, including the common tern, which is designated as a threatened species in New York State. Based on input received by DEC from public meetings, letters,

and citizen task forces dealing with this issue, there is strong public support for expanded cormorant management in New York.

In response to growing concerns about impacts of cormorants on fish, other wildlife, and the habitats they utilize, DEC developed plans to expand cormorant management in affected areas of New York beginning in spring 2004. The four areas are: eastern Lake Ontario, Oneida Lake, Buffalo Harbor/Niagara River, and Lake Champlain. The goal of these management actions is to reduce the impact of cormorants on other natural resources by limiting cormorant numbers and productivity in areas where conflicts are occurring. Over the long term, these efforts should lead to a gradual reduction in cormorant populations to desired levels as determined by DEC and public input.

DEC, in cooperation with USDA, will carry out more extensive cormorant management activities including: egg-oiling and nest destruction in all four areas; spring and fall hazing programs to reduce cormorant predation on fish in Oneida Lake and other Central New York lakes; and taking no more than 600 cormorants by direct lethal means. Direct removal of cormorants will be done primarily either to prevent the pioneering of new nesting sites to eliminate birds that resist hazing techniques, especially in trees that are too high for nest destruction techniques, or to evaluate impacts of lethal controls on cormorant populations and other colonial waterbirds nesting nearby.

Under this plan, cormorants will not be eliminated from any areas and there will still be ample viewing opportunities for people who enjoy seeing these interesting birds. Based on formal public involvement processes, specific population goals have been set for eastern Lake Ontario (1,500 nesting pairs) and Oneida Lake (a minimum of 20 nesting pairs, but no more than 100 birds.) In other areas, cormorant numbers will be limited to levels judged by DEC staff to be compatible with other nesting waterbird populations.

DEC's efforts in Central New York will be focused on protecting important recreational fisheries for smallmouth bass in eastern Lake Ontario and for yellow perch and walleye in Oneida Lake. Long-term studies by DEC and Cornell University have shown a strong connection between the dramatic increase in cormorant populations and declining fish populations in these areas. Other factors, including water quality changes and introduction of zebra mussels, have also been considered as contributors to certain declining fish populations.

Results of DEC's cormorant management efforts in 2004 will be evaluated to determine plans for cormorant management in future years. DEC will continue a variety of survey and research programs, in cooperation with USDA, researchers from Cornell University, and others to evaluate the effectiveness of management efforts. Research efforts include long-term studies of cormorant ecology, population dynamics, movements, food habits, and the response to management activities, as well as fish stock assessments, and monitoring colonial waterbird populations in managed areas.

DEC will coordinate management and research efforts with colleagues in Ontario, Canada, and Vermont to ensure a cooperative regional approach. One area being considered for cormorant management in the future is the St. Lawrence River, where a growing population of 114 cormorant pairs are nesting on three New York islands and another 2,380 pairs are nesting on nearby islands in Ontario, Canada. If this population continues to expand, potential conflicts with Common Terns and important warm water fish populations in the River may warrant cormorant control measures.

DEC has prepared a document titled: "Management of Double-crested Cormorants to Protect Public Resources in New York - Statement of Findings." This document describes the actions

planned for specific areas of New York State and discusses issues identified in a recent Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for cormorant management in the U.S. The EIS was completed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 2003, and frequently cites research findings and management issues in New York. Many organizations and individuals from New York State, including DEC, provided input to USFWS during public meetings and comment periods while the EIS was being developed. For more information about DEC's cormorant management plans and to view the cormorant management document, go to the DEC website at: <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/cormorant/index.html> .