



Sen. Debbie Stabenow announces \$40 million conservation investment across Michigan, including \$10 million for Saginaw Bay Watershed

Conservation press conference at Bay City State Recreation Area in Bangor Township on Tuesday, May 27
U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow speaks about conservation in the Saginaw Bay area during a press conference at the Bay City State Recreation Area in May 2014. *(MLive File Photo)*

Andrew Dodson | adodson@mlive.com By Andrew Dodson | adodson@mlive.com

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BAY CITY, MI — The Saginaw Bay Watershed is set to receive \$10 million in federal funds for projects to improve water quality and wildlife habitat.

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow on Wednesday, Jan. 14, announced a \$40 million investment in five conservation projects across Michigan as part of the **new Regional Conservation Partnership Program** created in the 2014 Farm Bill.

"This is one of — if the not the largest — investment in Great Lakes water quality that I've ever seen," Stabenow said in an interview with The Times. "We are really excited for the Saginaw Bay to be receiving a large portion of the funding because we understand the water quality issues in that watershed."

Conservation initiatives in the Saginaw Bay Watershed are being led in partnership by the Nature Conservancy and the Michigan Agri-Business Association, along with 35 local partners, including Michigan Sugar Co., Star of the West and Auburn-based Crop Production Services.

The funds are to be used to work with farmers in the 22-county watershed on specific practices to conserve water, restore acres of wetlands, reduce excessive sediments and nutrients in the watershed and monitor long-term trends in the fish population and habitat in a more hands-on approach.

In addition to helping farmers install filter strips, plant cover crops and create nutrient management plans, the two organizations are leveraging the private sector to work closely with farmers to ensure best conservation practices.

"Farmers in the last few years have been really investing in precision agriculture. What we're really trying to do now is precision conservation," said Rich Bowman, director of government relations for the Nature Conservancy.

Ray Van Driessche, Michigan Sugar's director of community and government relations, said as a partner of the initiative, the company is to put out information to support the program's conservation efforts.

"Being in the Saginaw Bay coastal area, we want to be supportive of any program that's geared toward conservation and enhancing water quality and our environment," he said.

One of the partners is Michigan State University, which is developing tools to determine how much conservation is coming from a particular treatment, Bowman said.

Erosion from farms in the Saginaw Bay Watershed distributes nutrients like phosphorus to waterways, covering up fish spawning grounds and contributing to algal bloom and beach closures.

The \$10 million investment is the second largest of the five announced projects.

The program is funding \$17.5 million into the Lake Erie Basin to reduce phosphorus in West Lake Erie Watershed, which spans across Michigan, Ohio and Indiana.

\$6.8 million is being spent on conservation projects in the St. Joseph Watershed; \$5 million to improve forest health across 12,000 acres of nonindustrial forest in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Minnesota and Wisconsin; and \$1 million to improve forests within the 12 million acres of private forest land across Michigan.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is providing \$1.2 billion in funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program over the next five years. The Great Lakes was identified as one of the eight "Critical Conservation Areas" across the country, receiving additional funding to handle water quality issues.

Stabenow came to the Bay City State Recreation Area in Bangor Township in May to announce the grant program, saying that Michigan could be the national model for the five-year program.

"This is a wonderful opportunity and such a unique program for those involved," Stabenow said.