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Hennepin, Lewistown marshes attract endangered species, international praise

LEWISTOWN – August 8, 2012. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon today dedicated two wetlands along the Illinois River that gained international prestige this year for transforming flood-prone land into natural habitats for endangered and native species and plants. Restoration of one wetland, the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge near Hennepin, helped bring back the pied-billed grebe from risk of extinction in Illinois, while the restoration of the Emiquon Complex near Lewistown has attracted thousands of American coots.

During a meeting of the Illinois River Coordinating Council (IRCC), Simon led council members and local conservationists in a joint celebration and dedication recognizing the Dixon refuge and the Emiquon Complex. The marshy ecosystems were officially designated Wetlands of International Importance by the federal government earlier this year in accordance with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, an international treaty signed by 162 nations committed to the protection of wetlands.

The Ramsar designation is a sought-after accolade for wetland advocates as it calls global attention to local conservation efforts and demonstrates the government's commitment to maintaining the ecological sites. In the case of Dixon and Emiquon, it highlights restoration efforts that returned the wetlands to their natural state. The sites are also home to several state and federal endangered species, including the Common Moorhen, Piping Plover, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and King Rail.

“The Dixon refuge and Emiquon Complex are international models of environmental restoration,” Simon said. “By returning this land to its natural state, we created a home for plants, fish and birds that were being driven to extinction and an environmental tourism destination that will attract visitors from all around. I want to thank the Ramsar Secretariat for recognizing the work that’s been done to restore these natural resources and helping to boost efforts moving forward.”

Dixon and Emiquon are two of three sites from the United States that received Ramsar designation this year and join the ranks of recognized sites around the world including along the Nile and Danube rivers. Of the over 2,000 designated sites, 34 are in the U.S. including the Cache River-Cypress Creek Wetlands and the Upper Mississippi River Floodplain Wetlands in Illinois.

To be designated as a Wetland of International Importance, a proposed site must meet at least one of nine criteria that validate its global importance. These criteria include supporting 20,000 or more waterbirds, housing vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered species and supporting at least 1 percent of the population of one species or subspecies of waterbird.

The 14,000 acre Emiquon Complex, which includes the Emiquon and Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuges and the Emiquon Preserve, is jointly managed by The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Emiquon met or exceeded eight of the nine criteria including the presence of 4.5 percent of the continental population of American coots and supporting hundreds of thousands of ducks, geese, and other waterbirds including the Pectoral Sandpiper, far surpassing the Ramsar criterion of 20,000.

The Emiquon Preserve is a major source of economic development, pumping $1.1 million into Fulton and Mason counties in 2009, according to a study by the University of Illinois. The study estimated that 17,000 tourists visited the preserve in 2009 to take advantage of the hiking, fishing, boating, wildlife viewing and waterfowl hunting opportunities that are available.

“This designation not only validates our successes to date, but also provides hope for conserving the ecological health of the Illinois River and other great rivers around the world as we share lessons learned at these sites,” said Doug Blodgett, director of river conservation at The Nature Conservancy and an IRCC citizen member.

The 2,700 acre Dixon Waterfowl Refuge is managed by The Wetlands Initiative and met six Ramsar criteria including serving as an important example of the region's rare native landscape and supporting biodiversity including 148 animal and plant species that are vulnerable to extinction in Illinois. This includes plants such as the yellow monkey-flower, royal catchfly, and decurrent false aster.

The refuge is open to the public daily for hiking, bird-watching, and paddling. A 30-foot-tall observation tower provides an expansive vista of the restored lakes and marsh, while a half-mile boardwalk trail from the boat launch parking lot allows up-close views of unique wetland plants and wildlife. These opportunities attract between 5,000 and 8,000 visitors annually.

"At the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge, 260 bird species and more than 570 native plants are contained in one of the most diverse natural areas in the state," said Paul Botts, executive director of The Wetlands Initiative. "There is a rich variety of habitat communities, including a rare seep. When standing in the refuge, you almost feel like you are in ancient wilderness. This certainly is one of the most significant sites on our planet to support a diversity of life."

The celebration, dubbed A Great Day for the Illinois River, was held at the Dickson Mounds Museum in Lewistown, but attendees were connected to participants at the Dixon Waterfowl Refuge through a live video feed. Speakers at the ceremony included Illinois Department of Natural Resources Director Marc Miller and Ivan Zavadsky of the United Nations Development Programme's Global Environment Facility.

In addition to the IRCC, Simon also chairs the Mississippi and the Ohio and Wabash river coordinating councils. These councils promote the environmental and economic health of Illinois' rivers and tributaries. The councils are composed of a diverse group of citizens, not-for-profit organizations, and state and federal agencies, and hold quarterly meetings across the state to gather local input on conservation issues.