

PROTECTING THE GREAT LAKES

Understanding Issues in the Great Lakes

The Great Lakes are the largest surface fresh water resource in the world; and hold 84% of North America’s fresh surface water. The Great Lakes basin encompasses multiple nations, states, provinces, tribes, and local jurisdictions and there is a long history of bipartisan support for protecting the lakes.

Building on the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement first signed with Canada in 1972 and the Great Lakes Task Force created in 2004 by President Bush, President Obama launched the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), a multi-agency effort to address the most important threats to the Great lakes ecosystem. Congressional funding of GLRI is an annual issue: President Trump proposed to eliminate all funding for the initiative, however with broad bipartisan support Congress has approved \$300 million for FY17.

The Initiative provides critical federal support to address critical challenges facing the basin: regional water quality, invasive species, and toxic pollution.

Water Quality—clean, safe water is essential to the health and wellbeing of millions of residents who rely on the basin for their drinking water. The crises in Flint, Michigan with lead contamination is just one example of the challenge of updating drinking water infrastructure in the region. In addition, recent algal blooms, such as those in Lake Erie in 2014 and 2015, also threaten drinking water as well as fishing and boating.



Invasive Species Control—From Asian Carp to Zebra Mussels, the Great Lakes have long been battered by invasive species that are deliberately imported to the basin to control other environmental problems or brought in inadvertently in the ballast water of ships. The effects can be devastating to native fish populations and water quality, damaging the environmental quality and

economic output of the Great Lakes region. Prevention and early detection are the most cost-effective methods to manage invasive species.

Toxic pollution cleanup—decades of dumping of toxic chemicals, agricultural run-off and destruction of wetlands have impaired the environmental and economic health of the region. All of the Great Lakes have advisories to limit fish consumption because of pollutants including mercury and PCBs that have accumulate in the fish. The US and Canada have identified 43 Areas of Concern—geographic areas with high levels of pollution or ecological impairment. Contaminated sediments are difficult and costly to remove but leaving them unaddressed creates problems for shipping/navigation of the lakes.

Key Talking Points

We need policies that reduce pollution at the source to prevent contamination from getting into the Great Lakes. Making pollution prevention a standard practice by farmers and industrial facilities is the least expensive way to keep contaminants out of the Lakes.

The best place to stop pollution is at the source. Farmers are finding new ways to keep the fertilizer and manure spread on the land and out of waterways. Policies that set rational ground rules for when farmers can apply fertilizer to their fields and that create real incentives to reduce nutrient pollution. Nutrient efficiency and soil health practices can create a powerful antidote to algae blooms.

Moreover, limits on pollution from coal-fired power plants in the region will help stop dangerous mercury contamination, which can render fish unfit to eat and cause health hazards to the brain, heart, kidneys, lungs, and immune system of people of all ages, especially young children. Similarly, making pollution prevention common business practice at industrial operations can improve the bottom line by boosting efficiency and protect the environment.

Improvements in aging infrastructure for drinking water, wastewater management, and storm water runoff benefit communities by keeping contaminants out of the Great Lakes watershed. Smart investments to upgrade environmental infrastructure protects lives and saves money.

Aging waste water infrastructure puts communities at risk for sewage leaks and storm water runoff that can contaminate drinking water and devastate wildlife habitats.

Public investment in updating wastewater systems is vital as it creates jobs, saves money and results in cleaner Great Lakes. Every \$1 million spent on water infrastructure is projected to generate nearly \$3 million in economic output, and every new job created in the water workforce is estimated to add almost four new jobs in the national economy.¹

¹ <http://www.glc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/GLC-Water-Infrastructure-Priorities-for-the-Great-Lakes-030217.pdf>

Federal EPA funding must be preserved to maintain ongoing cleanup efforts of legacy pollutions along with the maintenance of EPA's core protective capacities.

Since it began in 2010, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has been funded at \$300 million annually or more, and has been a rousing success whether defined by ecological improvements or economic gains. In fact, a Brookings Institution report shows that every \$1 invested in Great Lakes restoration brings a \$2 return in the form of increased fishing, tourism, and home values.

Spending a great deal on restoration the region while compromising U.S. EPA's ability to put those dollars to work makes no sense. Spending billions on cleaning up a legacy of 20th century toxic pollution without seriously confronting the toxic byproducts of agricultural runoff today substitutes one problem for another.