



Great Lakes Restoration Legislation

Regional Priorities for the Great Lakes

March 2007

Background on the Issue

The Great Lakes are a unique and extraordinary natural resource for the region and the nation. Today, more than 35 million Americans receive the benefits of drinking water, food, a place to work and live, and transportation from the Great Lakes.

A variety of stressors impair the health of the Great Lakes and deterioration of the ecosystem is accelerating. As a result, Lake Erie has developed a 3,900 square mile dead zone; the zebra mussel, just one of more than 180 aquatic invasive species in the Great Lakes, is causing \$500 million per year in economic and environmental damage; and populations of diporeia, an important part of the Great Lakes food chain, are collapsing. Aquatic invasive species continue to arrive at the rate of one every eight months. At the same time, past and ongoing development has compromised Great Lakes habitats, and threatens the plants and animals that need them to survive. Many of our coastal areas suffer from massive sewer overflows that contaminate the water and close the beaches. The 31 U.S. areas identified more than 15 years ago where the most significant harm to the resources has occurred continue to be of great concern; only one has been restored to date. Continued pollution from nonpoint sources in

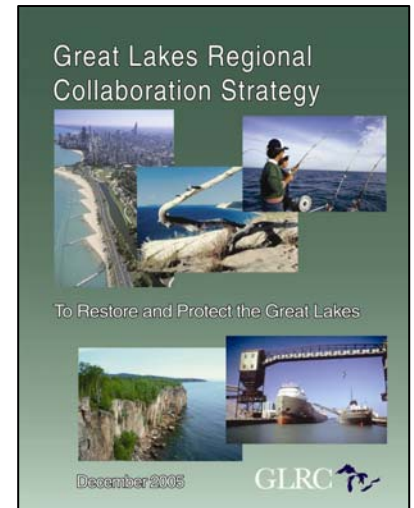
these areas and many others contribute to impaired water quality and related problems. Although releases of toxic pollutants have been reduced significantly over the years, there is a legacy of contamination in sediments and fish throughout the system, and mercury and other pollutants continue to enter the Great Lakes from nearby and distant sources. While large amounts of data and information on the Great Lakes have been collected over the years, not enough of that has been transformed into knowledge about the key indicators of the health of the ecosystem. In addition, many of the practices of industry, agriculture, communities and private citizens simply have not been sustainable.

In December 2005, the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration released a strategic action plan for protecting and restoring the Great Lakes. The Regional Collaboration was a partnership of more than 1,500 federal, state and local government officials and interested stakeholders. The restoration blueprint highlights the highest priority actions to restore and protect the Great Lakes.

Congressional Priorities for Great Lakes Restoration

A significant increase in funding is essential to support protection, restoration and cleanup of the Great Lakes. Funding from the federal government is needed to fulfill the promises in the blueprint and to match the significant investment of states, cities, local governments and private funds.

Accordingly, the Great Lakes Commission requests that Congress authorize funding to coordinate federal actions and implement recommendations from the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration restoration strategy.



This fact sheet prepared by the Great Lakes Commission

The Great Lakes Commission is an interstate compact agency that works on behalf of the eight Great Lakes states to advance restoration, protection and sound management of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin.

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Funding History and Committee Jurisdiction

The legislation requested for federal coordination is a new authority and, therefore, these specific provisions have not been funded previously. More broadly, the legislation sought encompasses authorization for funding a comprehensive suite of federal programs, many of which have been chronically underfunded and address the following areas:

- Invasive Species
- Areas of Concern
- Sustainable Development
- Habitat and Species
- Toxic Substances
- Coastal Health
- Indicators and Information

Comparable legislation to implement the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy was introduced in the 109th Congress and referred to the following committees:

House Reference: H.R. 5100

- Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
 - Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
 - Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
- Committee on Natural Resources
 - Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans
- Committee on Science and Technology
 - Subcommittee on Environment, Technology, and Standards
- Committee on Administration

Senate Reference: S. 2545

- Committee on Environment and Public Works.

Progress to Date

The diverse array of federal programs included under the proposed legislation is described in more detail in the report: *Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes* and in the accompanying appendices. This extensive collection of material may be found at the web site: www.gllrc.us/strategy.html, which documents the needs for funding and coordination among more than 100 federal programs.

Benefits to the Great Lakes Region

- Immediate action to stop the introduction of more **aquatic invasive species** (AIS) can prevent significant future ecological and economic damage to the Great Lakes.
- The plants and animals of the Great Lakes need habitat in order to survive in the future, and there is a need for significantly more **habitat conservation and species management**.
- The **nearshore waters and the coastal areas** are the region's largest source of drinking water and support a valuable array of recreational activities. Enhanced programs are needed to minimize the risk to human health resulting from contact with pollution in nearshore waters.
- The United States identified the 31 most contaminated locations on the Great Lakes under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement with Canada more than 15 years ago. Only one has been restored to date. To remedy this situation, a dramatic acceleration of the cleanup process at these **Areas of Concern** (AOCs) is needed.
- **Nonpoint sources of pollution** contribute significantly to problems in the AOCs, as well as to other locations in the Great Lakes, including the open waters.
- **Toxic pollutants** continue to stress the Great Lakes ecosystem, posing threats to human and wildlife health. Persistent toxic substances such as mercury and PCBs remain present in fish at levels that warrant advisories and restrict consumption throughout the basin.
- With a resource as large and complex as the Great Lakes ecosystem, it is essential to have a **sound information base and representative indicators** to understand what is happening in the system. This information must then be communicated to the public, to decision makers, and other stakeholders.
- Ensuring the long term **sustainability** of the Great Lakes resource will require a number of significant changes in the way we approach such things as land use, agriculture and forestry, transportation and industrial activity, among others.

Links for More Information

Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy: www.gllrc.us/strategy.html