Statement of the Honorable Rahm Emanuel
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment - Progress Toward Improving Water Quality in the Great Lakes
January 23, 2008

Subcommittee Chairwoman Johnson, Ranking Member Baker, Chairman Oberstar, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify here today. Being from Chicago, the Great Lakes have been an important part of my life for a very long time. I remember very distinctly that my brothers and I would go swimming in Lake Michigan, and we would literally have to hold our breath to swim under the dead fish until we could come up where the water was clean enough to swim and play. We have made long strides in cleaning up Lake Michigan and the rest of the Lakes, but we still have a long way to go.

I am proud that since our Democratic majority has taken the helm over the past year, this Congress has been able to achieve some significant gains for the Great Lakes under the leadership of Chairman Oberstar, Chairwoman Johnson, and this committee. The House passed legislation to increase funding for State Revolving Funds and the Combined Sewer Overflow program, both of which were long overdue. We finally passed into law a Water Resources Development Act that invests in our waterways and in American jobs and that finally funds outstanding projects like the Asian Carp barrier that will protect the Great Lakes from invasive species.

But last year highlighted additional threats facing the Great Lakes. Last spring, the state of Indiana issued a permit to an NPDES BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana. This action was met with public outrage and incredulity among those of us who have fought for years to protect the Great Lakes. As you know, BP's new permit will enable their Whiting plant to increase the amount of "total suspended solids" and ammonia discharged into Lake Michigan. After a series of meetings with BP America President Bob Malone and a great deal of public pressure, including tens of thousands of signatories on petitions to BP and the state of Indiana, BP publicly declared that they would not increase their effluent levels beyond their previous permit.

Unfortunately, though, the problems were not over. Later in the year, the state of Indiana issued another permit threatening Lake Michigan, this time to US Steel. Fortunately, the EPA objected to the permit, and revisions to the permit are still being discussed. But the US Steel permit highlighted, in my mind, the three biggest questions currently surrounding the Great Lakes--

1) What are the states doing to implement the GLI (Great Lakes Water Quality Initiative) and how are they complying with the agreements they made over a decade ago;

2) What can be done to encourage an economic partnership that links the mutual interests of the environmental health of the Great Lakes and the economic development of industries in the region; and

3) How can we move beyond "protecting" the status quo by preserving the status quo of pollution levels and instead move to improve the conditions of the Lakes?

On the first issue, I want to commend Chairman Oberstar for his leadership and thank him for requesting a GAO report on the issue of state compliance with the GLI. But judging by the BP and US Steel NPDES permits and particularly the issue of variances for mercury emissions, it is clear that we must be more vigilant about state compliance with the GLI. I was pleased to learn that EPA Region V objected to US Steel's permit, but I also had to stop and ask if it took the public outcry over BP to force them to act on US Steel. If that was indeed the case, then vigorous Congressional oversight will continue to be necessary to make sure that the EPA is keeping a close eye on the states when it comes to what they allow industry to discharge into the Great Lakes.

As for the second question, if the BP experience taught us anything, it's that environmental stewardship and economic development can--and should--go hand in hand. In the many discussions Senator Durbin and I had with Bob Malone, we talked about how BP had earned its green reputation by going above and beyond the call environmentally--and how they needed to be especially sensitive to the Great Lakes to maintain that green reputation. BP needs the Great Lakes, and the Great Lakes need companies like BP. But neither industry nor the Lakes will be happy if we don't take care of the Lakes and ensure that they are there for generations to come. Brookings came out with a study in 2007 that said what we have been arguing for a long time--investing in the Great Lakes will yield great dividends. The Brookings Study found that investing $26 billion into the restoration of the Great Lakes would result in over $50 billion in economic development for the region. All of us--environmentalists, industrialists, politicians, and so on--should be pushing for implementation of the recommendations of the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration for the economic and environmental health of the economic engine that drives the Midwest.

Which leads us to question number three. We've done a lot of work through the Legacy Act and other initiatives to clean up polluted areas of the Great Lakes. But the Great Lakes need more than a series of band-aids, they need serious injections of resources and manpower. Despite all of our hard work, we still see record beach closures, fish consumption advisories, new invasive species like VHS and other major issues. The Great Lakes are--and will continue to be--the economic engine of the Midwest. There are a lot of us in Congress who represent Great Lakes states, and we need to continue to put this tremendous resource at the top of our list of our priorities. This is our Grand Canyon, our Yellowstone, and we need to stop trying to patch it up, and start trying to make it flourish.

I look forward to working with the subcommittee and the committee on addressing the challenges facing the Great Lakes in the year to come. I thank you for convening this hearing on Water Quality in the Great Lakes, and thank you for inviting me to testify today.