

**Statement of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
Hearing On
“Reauthorization of the Great Lakes Legacy Act”
May 21, 2008**

Today, the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment holds a hearing on the reauthorization of the Great Lakes Legacy Act. When I worked with Congressman Ehlers on this legislation in 2002, we – along with many members of this body – had high hopes for its success. And we have seen some successes; sites have been cleaned up. But, truth be told, results from this program have been underwhelming.

We are here this morning to hear how changes can be made towards improving the Legacy Act. And I welcome hearing such recommendations from the witnesses gathered here. Because many of the needs that existed in 2002 remain today, I look forward to hearing about what improvements can be made. But whether it is a matter of funding, or whether it is a matter of structural improvements that need to be made, or whether it is a matter of implementation, we simply must do better.

As we think about reauthorizing the Legacy Act, I think it is important to reflect on the importance of the Great Lakes to both our nation’s history, and to our nation today. The population centers of the Great Lakes basin were largely responsible for the industrial powerhouse that was the United States in the late nineteenth, and throughout the twentieth, centuries. The lakes themselves served as sources of power, resources, and transportation for the cities, factories, and towns of the basin. And it important to note that what the Lakes offered benefited not only the people of the region, but of the entire nation. The commerce engendered there provided not only goods for the country, but a rich source of tax revenues that helped every other state in the Union to grow and prosper.

But the legacy wrought from this high concentration of industry was the toxic legacy of pollution that ran unabated into the rivers, streams and bays of the Great Lakes for decades on end. This pollution – in many, many places – remains today. Contaminated sediments continue to poison estuaries, bays and harbors throughout the region. And today, in an era of low lake levels, these sediments are increasingly stirred up when the container ships so vital to the region’s economy pass by.

The Legacy Act was originally designed to work in tandem with Superfund. Where CERCLA focused on large toxic sites, the Legacy Act envisioned a more flexible mechanism to get at those relatively smaller sites that did not make Superfund’s National Priorities List. But many of those sites that remained, were to large, complex, and poisoned for individual groups, communities, or states to deal with on their own.

We realized in 2002 that only with the assistance of the federal government could we begin to address these toxic hotspots and begin the process of giving back to the Great Lakes and Great Lakes communities what they have given to us.

But in addition to the addressing the environmental and social good of remediating past pollution, there are very real economic benefits to cleaning up the Great Lakes. In a recent report, the Brookings Institution has determined that if the myriad sources of water quality degradation in the Great Lakes are effectively addressed, the Great Lakes region will realize \$50 billion in net benefits. Among these benefits, Brookings notes these direct economic gains stem from:

Restoration of the Lakes will lead to \$6.5 to \$11.8 billion in benefits from tourism, fishing, and recreation;

Remediating the toxic Areas of Concern throughout the lakes will improve coastal property values to the tune of \$12 to \$19 billion;

Decreasing sediment runoff will reduce costs to municipalities by \$50 to \$125 million;

And finally, while difficult to quantify, improving water quality in the Great Lakes will result in environmental and aesthetic benefits which will make Great Lakes cities and communities increasingly attractive to businesses and workers.

My hope is that today's hearing will provide the Subcommittee with information whereby positive and constructive changes can be made in reauthorizing this legislation. The framework remains sound, but it must be fine-tuned to increase the pace at which these many contaminated sites in the basin are addressed and ultimately delisted.