Great Lakes Commission
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Testimony of the Great Lakes Commission to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative: A Review of the Progress and Challenges in Restoring the Great Lakes

Testimony Presented by
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September 30, 2015

Introduction

The Great Lakes Commission welcomes the opportunity to review progress in restoring the Great Lakes under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and appreciates the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment convening a hearing on a topic of such importance to the Commission's eight member states. This testimony is based on approved policy of the Great Lakes Commission representing the eight Great Lakes states. The Commission was established in 1955 by joint legislative action of the Great Lakes states (via the Great Lakes Basin Compact) and granted Congressional consent in 1968. A Declaration of Partnership established associate membership for the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec in 1999. The Commission's offices are located in Ann Arbor, MI.

The Great Lakes: A Vital Asset for the Great Lakes States

The Great Lakes are a vital environmental and economic asset for the eight states and two provinces of the Great Lakes region. With 90 percent of our nation's supply of fresh surface water, the Great Lakes provide unparalleled recreational opportunities for residents and tourists; abundant fresh water for communities and industries; an efficient transportation system for raw materials and finished goods; and extensive habitat for valuable fish and wildlife resources. They provide the social and cultural backdrop for millions of citizens and visitors to our communities, cities and shores. The Great Lakes are ecologically, economically, socially and culturally important to the United States and to Canada.

The lakes are a significant component of our regional economy. A recent report from NOAA found that 300,000 jobs and $16 billion in GDP depend on the Great Lakes. For instance, the water-dependent economy of the Great Lakes states grew much faster than other sectors of the economy in 2012, and now has more value than the electric power generation, telecommunication and home construction industries combined. A recent economic study from a coalition of Michigan's top research universities documented that in Michigan alone one in five jobs depend on water.

These figures—and the growing value of abundant fresh water—illustrate that the Great Lakes provide our region with a unique competitive advantage. For this reason, restoring,

protecting and wisely using the lakes is a key component of our region's broader strategy to create jobs, stimulate economic development, and strengthen waterfront communities and remains in the national interest to support a vibrant regional economy.

Restoring the Great Lakes: A Bipartisan Priority

Restoring and caring for the Great Lakes is a longstanding and bipartisan priority for federal, state and local leaders in the region. The region's current restoration program is based on a comprehensive strategy initiated by a set of priorities identified by the region's Governors and developed with active input from more than 1,500 stakeholders across the eight-state region. This strategy was put into action under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which began under President Obama and enjoyed the support of a bipartisan contingent of Members of Congress.

Since it began in 2010, the GLRI has enjoyed enthusiastic and bipartisan support among Great Lakes leaders, regional organizations, and the Great Lakes Congressional delegation. Each year the Commission collaborates with a coalition representing state, tribal and local governments, conservation groups, and business and industries on a suite of priorities for the Great Lakes, with the GLRI being top on the list. Sustaining Great Lakes restoration has been a consistent priority for the House and Senate Great Lakes Task Forces, and earlier this year a bipartisan group of 51 members of the House delegation wrote to the appropriations committee supporting level funding of $300 million for the GLRI in FY 2016. Since it began, Congressional support for the GLRI has been consistent and bipartisan.

Key Elements of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

The Great Lakes Commission and its member states have been actively engaged with the GLRI since its inception and, overall, have found it to be a strong and well-managed program. It has been innovative in administering funding through an array of programs and authorities from across a spectrum of federal agencies with the intent to target resources to projects that address the most serious problems facing the Great Lakes. While U.S. EPA manages the overall program, the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force ensures engagement from across the federal government and leverages specific areas of expertise in each agency. This process has evolved to include multi-agency subgroups focused on specific priorities with the goal being to improve efficiency in identifying and targeting resources to priority projects.

The GLRI is supported by sound science and is guided by an Action Plan with detailed performance goals. A Science Advisory Board recommended improvements that have largely been incorporated. Perhaps most significant, U.S. EPA convened a Great Lakes Advisory Board in 2013 to secure advice and guidance on the GLRI from a broad range of interests, including the Great Lakes states. This engagement process needs to be ongoing to appropriately adjust performance goals to reflect changes in the lakes.

The Government Accountability Office's (GAO) reviews of the GLRI have offered useful recommendations for improving its efficiency and managing information, monitoring and reporting. Two noteworthy improvements are the implementation of a new information management system to replace the Great Lakes Accountability System (GLAS); and the creation of interagency subgroups to identify priority actions in specific areas. Interagency collaboration and coordination with the Great Lakes states is critical in targeting resources toward high priority cleanup projects in the remaining Areas of Concern (AOCs). The GAO's reviews have been mostly positive and have not identified critical flaws in the management of the GLRI program. This generally is consistent with the states' experiences working under the program.

Role of the Great Lakes States in Implementing Great Lakes Restoration Efforts

The Great Lakes states are deeply involved in implementing the GLRI, as they must be. Over the past decade the states helped formulate the GLRI focus areas, which draw from a suite of overarching priorities originally identified by the Great Lakes Governors. Because of their delegated authorities under the Clean Water Act and other federal laws, the states have the staff and programmatic resources in place to identify and support implementation of restoration projects that are priorities for the states. The states have a particularly prominent role in guiding cleanup work in the AOCs, including establishing criteria for removing beneficial use impairments, identifying the necessary remediation actions,

conducting monitoring to assess progress, and coordinating progress in achieving goals with local stakeholders. State staff are leading implementation of many restoration projects and frequently assist local agencies and other partners in this area. The states are best able to discern which projects are truly critical for achieving the GLRI's goals and designing them toward that end. In most cases, state agencies are also responsible for issuing regulatory permits for projects under relevant federal and state laws. Collectively, these are critical functions that most often only the states can provide; without them, GLRI projects would be harder or impossible to identify, cost more or take longer to implement. The states are also in the best position to coordinate state-based resources that provide collateral benefits to a location or region, such as using recreational, public access or other programs.

Beyond the GLRI, the states are actively involved in—and are vital to the success of—other Great Lakes-related programs and initiatives, including efforts under the ten annexes of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement with Canada, which was renewed in 2012. In the long term, it is important that actions under the GLRI are consistent with, and supportive of, the broader ongoing domestic and binational management regime for the lakes.

Highlights of Progress to Date

The GLRI has stimulated impressive progress over the past five years. Nearly $2 billion has been appropriated by Congress and administered through the Interagency Task Force for more than 2,500 restoration projects across the eight-state Great Lakes region. This has resulted in the removal of 42 beneficial use impairments—with more removals in the pipeline—and completed cleanup work in six AOCs; generated a 70 percent increase in farmland enrolled in conservation programs in priority watersheds; restored or protected nearly 150,000 acres of habitat; removed or bypassed 500 barriers to open more than 3,400 miles of rivers and streams for fish; and helped prevent the introduction of Asian carp by supporting surveillance and response actions and development of new control technologies through the multi-agency Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee.

Perhaps the most striking impacts from the GLRI are being seen in the AOCs, where cleanup and restoration work is enabling communities to revitalize once-degraded waterfront areas, provide new recreational opportunities, enhance fishing, maintain commercial and recreational boating, and stimulate business development in under-utilized urban areas. Some noteworthy examples include, but are by no means limited to:

- In **Ashtablula, Ohio**, U.S. EPA, the Ashtabula City Port Authority and local industries completed the largest cleanup to date under the Great Lakes Legacy Act on the Ashtabula River, removing nearly 600,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediments. The project deepened the river and allowed for the return of normal commercial navigation and recreational boating. This will generate long-term economic benefits by ensuring the future viability of the Port of Ashtabula, which moves more than 10 million tons of coal annually and ranks among the top 10 busiest ports in the Great Lakes. The project will also contribute to the removal of fish consumption advisories on the river and reduce toxic pollution flowing into the open waters of Lake Erie.

- In **Wisconsin, the Kinnickinnic River**, south of downtown Milwaukee, was plagued by contaminated mudflats and a dilapidated shoreline that threatened the viability of existing businesses and hampered new economic development. Removing contaminated sediments and improving the shoreline brought back boaters, revitalized existing businesses and stimulated new development. The sediment cleanup and subsequent business investments have revitalized a formerly neglected part of the city and made the Kinnickinnic River a vital part of the local economy that will pay dividends for decades.

- In **Michigan, Muskegon Lake** was left with widespread contaminated sediments, a severely degraded shoreline, and diminished fish and wildlife following the decline of heavy industries and nearly a century of intensive use and neglect. Concerted efforts by state, federal and local agencies and citizens have remediated much of this pollution and the community is developing bike trails, promoting outdoor recreation and other tourism-friendly activities, and developing a port plan that is consistent with the restoration work. The shoreline restoration alone will increase property values by nearly $12 million, contribute $600,000 in new tax revenues annually, and attract 65,000 new visitors to the lake generating more than $1 million in new recreational spending.

- The **Buffalo River in New York** is undergoing one of the largest river revitalization efforts in the country and is a leading example of how environmental remediation can drive economic development. Dozens of polluted industrial sites have been cleaned up and nearly 1 million cubic yards of contaminated sediments have been removed from the river bottom. Habitat is being restored for valuable native species and new "pocket parks" are providing community access to the river for fishing, boating and wildlife viewing. More than $75 million in public and private investment is fueling new development, much of it on former brownfields along the river. More than 3,000 jobs will be created by one new facility alone—the largest solar panel production plant in the world being built along the restored Buffalo River.

The common theme among these and other restoration projects being implemented under the GLRI is how they are transforming an eyesore and liability into an important asset for local communities. Communities across the Great Lakes are once again turning their face back to the water after decades of ignoring waterfronts or using them as dumping grounds. As a result, businesses, jobs, wildlife and *people* are returning to these rivers and other waterfront areas across the Great Lakes region. While the GLRI's performance measures assess the number of beneficial use impairments removed and AOCs "delisted," the true value rests in communities reclaiming their water resources as positive, productive assets—as economically, socially and culturally important places—to be embraced and leveraged to promote economic growth and a high quality of life. Ultimately, the GLRI will generate multiple benefits beyond the ecosystem improvements that are its primary focus.

Opportunities to Improve the GLRI and the Great Lakes Management Regime

The Great Lakes Commission offers the following recommendations for improving the GLRI and the overall Great Lakes management regime. These recommendations will benefit the GLRI in the near term while also strengthening long-term, collective resource management, protection and conservation efforts.

- **Coordination, consultation and engagement with the Great Lakes states**: Existing structures and practices in this area are not working as well as they could or should. The states are more than just stakeholders and have sovereign authorities and regulatory responsibilities for the Great Lakes. They need and deserve better engagement from both U.S. EPA and other federal agencies, particularly in establishing program priorities and planning projects. The states' implementation capabilities and relationships with local communities are vital to bringing federal funding to bear on priority actions. The Commission recently wrote to the EPA Administrator requesting that improved mechanisms be established for more routinely engaging the states on both near-term GLRI-related priorities and implementation projects, as well as longer-term resource management programs and priorities.

- **State capacity and an effective federal-state partnership for long-term Great Lakes conservation:** The Commission looks forward to strengthening and sustaining an effective partnership with the federal government to ensure federal programs – whether the GLRI or GLWQA – are integrated with state workplans, strategies and priorities. Integrated federal-state planning will ensure the right projects get done and that our investments are sustainable—both are significant concerns for the states. Maintaining consistent capacity at the state level is vital and must be a cornerstone of an effective federal-state partnership. Critical actions to reduce nutrient loadings, remediate contaminated sediments, restore habitat, protect drinking water, or adapt to climate change will not be possible without state support consistent with their sovereign jurisdiction over water resources.

- **Information management and reporting**: The states and others implementing GLRI projects have long been frustrated with the GLAS system. The new Environmental Accomplishments in the Great Lakes (EAGL) system is coming online and appears to be a significant improvement. Efficient information management and reporting is vital, both for administrative purposes but also to effectively communicate progress to the public.

- **Long-term ecological monitoring to assess progress and adapt programs**: Greater emphasis and resources are needed for long-term ecological and water quality monitoring. The recent GLRI report to Congress showed that funding in this area has declined by more than two thirds since 2010. Ongoing monitoring is needed to

inform an adaptive management framework to enable us to assess the effectiveness of our work and best target future investments.

- **Integration with actions under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA):** A variety of new activities and structures are being implemented under the 2012 GLWQA, including Lakewide Action and Management Plans, ecosystem monitoring, nutrient reduction and nonpoint source management, and resiliency to climate change. Work under the GLRI and its associated intergovernmental processes should be integrated with these efforts to ensure an efficient and effective long-term management regime for the Great Lakes.

- **Targeting conservation and nutrient reduction actions to priority watersheds:** The increase in harmful algal blooms in recent years, and their impacts on drinking water and recreation, underscore the need to target nutrient reduction programs to watersheds that contribute significant nutrient loadings to the lakes. Working in conjunction with the states, the GLRI has wisely targeted priority watersheds to Western Lake Erie, Saginaw Bay and Green Bay. However, continued improvement is needed to target and coordinate with the states on other conservation programs, particularly those administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The new Regional Conservation Partnership Program, established under the 2014 Farm Bill, is now underway, with the Great Lakes designated as a Critical Conservation Area due to harmful algal blooms. Significant resources are being provided under this program, which must be monitored closely to ensure nutrient reduction actions are directed to watersheds identified by the states as priorities and that generate documented, long-term water quality improvements. While this is beyond the purview of the GLRI per se, it speaks to the need for effective coordination of all programs that address the health of the Great Lakes. Finally, nutrient reduction actions and strategies are needed in many other watersheds, beyond those currently being targeted by the GLRI, that are known to contribute significant amounts of nutrients to the lakes.

Legislative priorities for Congress

The Commission reiterates two priorities for the current Congress:

1. **Sustain funding for the GLRI:** Continued funding for the GLRI, together with ongoing program reviews and accountability, will build on planning, investments and progress underway at the federal, state, tribal and local levels. This will help maintain progress toward achieving goals outlined in the new GLRI Action Plan, which focuses on completing the clean-up in 10 more Areas of Concern, reducing phosphorus runoff that causes harmful algal blooms, controlling invasive species, and restoring habitat for native species. We strongly encourage regular, objective review and evaluation of the program's results toward these goals and benchmarks. As discussed above and documented by the GAO, a solid foundation is in place to maintain and accelerate the progress we have achieved over the past five years. The Commission urges Congress and the Administration to continue this successful program and that it be implemented with clear performance measures and accountability built in at the federal and state levels.

2. **Pass legislation formally authorizing the GLRI:** A top priority for the Commission is to secure formal legislative authorization of the GLRI to ensure Congress is able to maintain the program's original mission into the next administration, while also clarifying and focusing accountability and congressional oversight of that mission. It is critical that all partners engaged in Great Lakes restoration and management see a long-term commitment to the program and one that will sustain and build on the progress seen to date. Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in both the House and Senate by Rep. David Joyce (H.R. 223) and Senators Mark Kirk and Tammy Baldwin (S. 1024/S. 504). Rep. Joyce's bill was passed by the House late last year under unanimous consent. In July the Commission and its regional partners wrote to Speaker Boehner and Majority Leader McConnell urging them to take up these bills, which direct U.S. EPA to collaborate with the Interagency Task Force and state and local partners to select the best projects to protect and restore the Great Lakes, with a focus on restoration projects that can be implemented quickly, that will achieve environmental outcomes outlined in the GLRI Action Plan and GLWQA, and that leverage other funding.

Achieving our Great Lake restoration goals is taking longer and is more complex than originally anticipated. While the achievements to date are substantial, they often reflect the "low-hanging fruit." Looking ahead, we face daunting challenges, including cleaning up the largest and most complex AOCs, such as the Detroit, Cuyahoga, Fox and Grand Calumet rivers—rivers that were heavily used and, in many cases, severely degraded during the latter half of the 20th century; further implementing a long-term solution to prevent the introduction of Asian carp into the Great Lakes system; and preventing harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie. Successfully confronting these challenges will require sustained focus, collaboration, science-based solutions, and long-term monitoring and adaptive management. The GLRI provides the necessary framework and capacities for continued progress and the Commission urges Congress to support the program and continue the successful federal-state-tribal-local partnerships underway to restore the Great Lakes.

Conclusion: Accelerating the "Blue Economy" to Build a Better Future for the Great Lakes Region

Great Lakes restoration is accelerating a growing "Blue Economy" as states, tribes, local communities, businesses and others leverage benefits from the immense supply of fresh water that defines our region. The increased interest in the Great Lakes as an economic asset, and the many new "place-based" opportunities for recreation, waterfront development, fishing or wildlife watching, underscore that our current restoration efforts are important not just to correct mistakes from the past, but also to build a better future for our children and grandchildren. The Great Lakes Commission thanks Congress for helping to restore the lakes as a natural treasure and vital economic asset for the eight-state region.