

**Written Testimony for Mayor John Dickert
Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)
Before the House Subcommittee on Water Resources
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
September 30, 2015**

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Gibbs, Ranking Member Napolitano, and members of the subcommittee for allowing me to testify on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). My name is John Dickert, I serve as the Mayor of Racine, Wisconsin, I am the Vice-Chair of the Conference of Mayors Metro Economies Committee and a member of the Mayors Water Council. I also serve on the Board of Directors and am past Chair of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, and served as past President for the Urban Alliance. I am here today testifying on behalf of both the Conference of Mayors and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative and I ask that my testimony being inserted into the record.

A short list of recognitions my city has earned during my tenure include: Best Tasting Water in America by the Conference of Mayors in 2011, the America in Bloom Award, certified as a Blue Wave Beach, designated a Well City in 2013, and USA Today named one of our beaches as one of the best in the nation. All of these awards signify my city's deep commitment to make my community better and how integral a role that the Great Lakes play in achieving that goal.

For those of you who may not know, Racine is a city of about 80,000, located South of Milwaukee and North of Chicago, right on the shores of Lake Michigan. Like many cities that are along the Great Lakes, Racine is trying to utilize one of our greatest assets. We have focused much of our economic redevelopment along the Lakeshore, utilizing our beaches to enhance our community as well as creating opportunities for travel and tourism.

The importance of water to our cities on the Great Lakes cannot be overstated. It nourishes our residents, provides industry and agriculture with what they need to be successful, is a place for recreation such as swimming, boating, fishing, and much more, and is essential to the overall quality of life and economic well-being of our communities. There is a tendency to take the resource for granted, as we learned again most recently in August of 2014 when the Mayor of Toledo had to advise nearly 500,000 citizens not to drink the water or bathe in it.

And let me state another obvious statistic related to that last point. The Great Lakes represent 20 percent of the fresh water supply in the world. The Conference of Mayors Water Council did a study where 35% of the cities surveyed did not know where their drinking water supplies would come from in 2020. It doesn't take that statistic or a four-year drought in the West to recognize how important it is to protect such a valuable natural resource.

And we, as Mayors, in turn, spend a lot of money on water priorities because our job is to protect the public health and safety of our residents. In 2012, local governments spent \$111 billion dollars on water and wastewater needs while unfortunately, Congress provided less than \$2 billion that eventually gets to cities in the form of loans. We need all of us to recognize the importance that water as well as infrastructure plays in maintaining a robust economy as well as protecting our environment. Please remember that 94 percent of our water withdrawals is used for drinking water, food production, and energy.

That is why the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is so important. It provides the opportunity to work with Federal and State agencies to protect this asset and accelerate the restoration of the Great Lakes substantially. I know this program has only been around since 2010 but, to date, it has funded nearly 2,700 projects, and has been very successful. There are 16 Federal Agencies that work together on GLRI priorities that include: Cleaning up toxics and areas of concern; Combating invasive species; protecting watersheds; and Restoring wetlands.

The Conference of Mayors is always supportive when agencies break down their silos and coordinate their efforts towards a more effective and efficient use of the taxpayers money. And the GLRI has some notable achievements. Perhaps one of the most dramatic examples is the cleanup of areas of concern (AOC) under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement with Canada. AOC's are designated areas around the Great Lakes where the contamination is especially serious and the quality of the resource so degraded that special attention is needed.

The United States has been working on the cleanup of 31 of these AOC's for over 20 years, and until the passage of funding for GLRI, only one had been cleaned up and removed from the list of AOC's. In the five years since GLRI was established, three additional AOC's have been removed from the list and all of the cleanup work needed to remove three more has been completed. For the six cities where this GLRI funded work has taken place, it will make a world of difference because being an AOC carries a stigma that is very difficult to overcome.

My neighbor up the shore of Lake Michigan, Mayor Mike Vandersteen of Sheboygan, Wisconsin is already seeing the benefits of having the cleanup work completed, as new development and more tourism, especially related to fishing, is already proceeding. One of my other neighbors, Mayor Tom Barrett of Milwaukee, had major work conducted on all three rivers running through his City and this is helping lay the foundation for major redevelopment in his Harbor District and other downtown areas.

Closer to home in Racine, we received \$250,000 in GLRI funding to build green infrastructure and restore Samuel Meyers Park. We have utilized GLRI and multiple other state and federal agencies to clean up a contaminated beach, rebuild our marina and harbor to be environmentally friendly while providing access for worldwide fishermen to enjoy the largest inland fishing tournament in the world. Mayors do this because we are good at blending projects like these three into one project for peak efficiency and cost savings.

To date, there has been an 80 – 95% reduction in invasive species, creation of 0.34 acres of constructed wetland, installation of over 10,000 native plants, removal of a source of polluted runoff, and delineation of an offshore swim zone that meets USEPA standards for recreation about 90% of the time. Additional funding attracted as a result of the initial GLRI investment is about \$439,000 in hard money (local, state and federal) and tens of thousands of dollars in in-kind/volunteer support. The multiple benefits of just one project are obvious, and what this means for the Great Lakes, the wildlife, and our community is a tremendous return on investment.

The advantage of investing in restoration projects in Great Lakes cities is that the funds can be turned into tangible projects on the ground and in the water quickly, to the benefit of the resource and to the people who live and visit in the area.

In addition, cities across the basin have received many GLRI grants over the years and these grants are contributing significantly to revitalization of the Great Lakes economy and the quality of life in the region, as well as the quality of this resource. The Great Lakes are the foundation of the 4th largest economy in the world. Millions of dollars in revenue to some of the communities around the basin help support some 35 million people and 1.5 million jobs with \$62 billion in wages.

Recommendations

Looking longer term, it would be very beneficial to have a formal authorization for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Both the Senate and House have introduced bills to do just that. In the Senate, the “Great Lakes Ecosystem and Economic Restoration Act (GLEEPA)” would formally authorize the institutions to help manage work by stakeholders and partners on the United States side of the Great Lakes and the funding under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative for projects to protect and restore the resource.

Specifically, authorization of the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force to integrate the work of the Federal departments and agencies, the Great Lakes Advisory Board to bring the perspective of many partners and stakeholders to the decision making process, and the Great Lakes National Program Office at the Environmental Protection Agency to administer and coordinate much of the Great Lakes work.

GLEEPA is also the place to make a more formal link between all the work done by U.S. partners and stakeholders to the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, our formal, mutual commitment to Canada to work together to protect and enhance the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Great Lakes ecosystem. Having the framework and funding more formally in place for a more extended period of time will give greater certainty to all those working on protecting and restoring the Great Lakes, rather than starting and stopping programs and projects on a year to year basis.

Funding from GLRI has been exceedingly important over the past 5 years to keep the Asian carp from reaching Lake Michigan through the Chicago Area Waterway System. The electric barrier, comprehensive monitoring, intensive commercial fishing, education, and much more have been instrumental in blocking this key pathway. Federal agencies have built some of this work into their base budgets, but having these funds available to take more immediate action, which is so important in dealing with invasive species, has been invaluable. The focus of GLRI on invasive species should continue in the future.

As to suggestions for improvements to GLRI in the future, the Great Lakes Initiative has the following suggestions:

- Formally recognize the importance of applying the principles of adaptive management to guide the investments under GLRI to ensure investments that achieve the project specific, regional, and basin wide ecosystem and public health goals and objectives of the GLRI and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement;
- Provide adequate funding for monitoring and assessment so that managers can more effectively judge how well projects and programs are working, and make necessary adjustments and adaptation to make them more effective in the future;

- Make the link between GLRI and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement more explicit and clear, especially as it relates to the general objectives, lake ecosystem objectives, and substance objectives of the Agreement;
- Provide direction and adequate funding to establish a more effective way to integrate and manage the data, information, and knowledge collected and gained by the many federal, state, local, tribal, academic, and non- government institutions and agencies to provide the tools to apply the principles and practices of sound adaptive management for the long term sustainability of the Great Lakes resource.

I cannot emphasize enough that we all must be fully engaged and fully committed to water issues if we are to succeed. You cannot do this half way because we need to remain vigilant about protecting this natural resource and unfortunately, it only takes a short time for our waters to become impaired.

Brownfields

I also wanted to take this opportunity to mention two other critical programs that are important to Great Lakes communities. The first is the issue of brownfields. I know my colleague, the Mayor of Elizabeth, Chris Bollwage, testified before you in July regarding the importance of reauthorizing the Brownfields Law. I would also like to voice my support.

Like most cities along the Great Lakes, Racine had a rich, industrial past, which unfortunately has left us a legacy of brownfields properties. If you look at these Great Lakes cities, we would probably tally hundreds of thousands of brownfield sites that are relics of that industrial past.

But make no mistake, these issues are related. Many brownfield sites are located on the shores of the Great Lakes and their cleanup and revitalization will assist us in our greater efforts of protecting and restoring the Great Lakes. It is vitally important for you to reauthorize the brownfields program because it assists us with our comprehensive efforts to revitalize our communities and improve the health of the Great Lakes.

Appropriations Language on Overflows

Another issue that I would also like to express concern over is a provision inserted in the Senate's FY 16 Appropriations bill for the Environmental Protection Agency (Section 428 of S. 1645) that would eliminate all sewer discharges into the Great Lakes which I, and many of my colleagues, believe would actually set back and undermine municipalities' efforts to restore water quality throughout the Great Lakes.

I know that on its face, eliminating all discharges sounds like a good idea. However, if enacted, the proposed new requirements would require communities to go back to the drawing board, raise tens of billions of additional ratepayer dollars to make additional investments without regard to corresponding water quality or public health outcomes.

Preliminary data indicate that the price tag would exceed \$65 billion for all Great Lakes communities; in Racine, the price tag would be \$700 million. These forced investments would be required even though no evidence or data have been offered to suggest that doing so would achieve any improvements in water quality in the Great Lakes.

In addition, these expenditures would come at the expense of other critically important water quality challenges to the Great Lakes that have been discussed this morning. Basically, what I'm saying is that you can either force us to spend billions of dollars on something that will have negligible benefits or we can focus on spending our taxpayers limited money on actions that will have a bigger impact in improving water quality.

I would strongly urge you to oppose this language from the Appropriations bill. I have attached to my testimony two letters sent to appropriators from a number of organizations working with communities to address water quality challenges in the Lakes that are opposed to this proposal including a joint letter from the US Conference of Mayors, National League of Cities, and the National Association of Counties, and a letter from the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative.

Conclusion

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak before you today. I hope that I have demonstrated just how critical the Great Lakes are for this nation and how important the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has had with our efforts to protect this national treasure.