

# With success comes responsibility

**2008** will be remembered as a turning point for the region, one in which long-planned protection and restoration efforts took major steps forward.

Among the year's noteworthy events were enactment by all eight Great Lakes states and Congress of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact restricting interbasin water diversion; reauthorization of the Great Lakes Legacy Act to clean up the lakes' most polluted point-source sites; and renewed appropriations for the Great Lakes Basin Program for control of soil and sediment erosion. Perhaps the most energizing of the year's highlights, however, was the election of a Great Lakes president, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, on a platform which included strong federal support for Great Lakes restoration.

To the Great Lakes Commission and its partners, the successes of the year brought the satisfaction of accomplishment, but also a realization that with long-sought tools and resources now in hand or on the horizon, the responsibility to use them wisely and effectively rests squarely on the Commission, its member states and associate provinces. Much of the Commission's activity in 2008 reflected a sense of that responsibility as the Commission continued to provide leadership in a wide breadth of issues facing the binational Great Lakes water resource.

Important guidance for this action agenda in 2008 was provided by a newly adopted two-year work plan, based on the Commission's strategic plan adopted the previous year. The new work plan identifies five programmatic priorities for the Commission's work, and four core strengths of the organization to be employed in carrying out those priorities.

Program priority areas include: aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity, which includes the sources of and responses to invasive species threatening the Great Lakes; economy and society, which addresses issues involving ports and navigation, energy, coastal development, and tourism and recreation; water supply to focus on water use, planning and conservation, and climate change; coastal and terrestrial habitat dealing with habitat protection and restoration; and water quality which includes watershed management, and pollution sources, both point and nonpoint.

The Commission's core strengths as identified in the work plan came under the headings of: communication and education; information integration and reporting; facilitation and consensus building; and policy coordination and advocacy. Details of the work plan are available at [www.glc.org/about/strategy](http://www.glc.org/about/strategy).

Advocacy on behalf of its member states and associate provinces has long been a Commission priority. A high point of the Great Lakes Commission's annual cycle occurs each year in late February when Commissioners, Observers, and other partners

gather in Washington, D.C., for the Commission's semiannual meeting and the Great Lakes Day rally on Capitol Hill.

One of the highlights of the 2008 Great Lakes Day events was the release of a report by the Great Lakes Commission and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative on investments made by cities and municipalities in Great Lakes-St. Lawrence protection and restoration. The report, funded by the Joyce Foundation, found that local governments in the United States and Canada invest an estimated \$15 billion annu-



*The snaking banks of the Big Carp River wind through the Porcupine Mountains of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.*

ally in such activities as wastewater systems operation, maintenance and infrastructure, greenspace protection and recycling/reuse programs.


“This report clearly demonstrates that our cities and other communities are ready and willing partners in the protection and restoration of the Great Lakes – St. Lawrence ecosystem,” said Michigan Lt. Gov. John Cherry, then-chair of the Great Lakes Commission. “Their contributions at the local level play a key role in the environmental health and well-being of the entire system, and they need and deserve federal support in those efforts.”

Generating increased federal support for Great Lakes protection and restoration was a key motivation for the cities investment study. To help track this and other legislative advocacy efforts, the Commission developed in 2008 a web-based tool to provide up-to-date information on Great Lakes legislative priorities. The site – part of the Great Lakes Information Network (GLIN) – helps to increase support for Great Lakes protection and restoration by providing easy access to the status of federal legislation and appropriations through a single web site: [www.glin.net/legislativepriorities](http://www.glin.net/legislativepriorities).

The site offers a searchable database of current legislative priorities, news updates, announcements of hearings and briefings, and information about members of the Great Lakes congressional delegation, including bills they’ve sponsored, maps of congressional districts and much more. Funded by the Wege Foundation, this project is helping to engage a wide array of audiences in the legislative process through information and education, and promotion of Great Lakes stewardship.

**C**ombating the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS) in the Great Lakes continued to be a high priority for the Great Lakes Commission in 2008. The Commission joined with the Great Lakes governors, the mayors of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, Great Lakes-St. Lawrence shipping interests and many other partners to support federal ballast water legislation to protect the Great Lakes from the most prominent AIS vector.

The collective effort came tantalizingly close to success. During the 110th Congress, several bills were introduced to mandate treatment of ballast water from oceangoing vessels. Most significantly, such provisions were included in the House-passed Coast Guard reauthorization bill (H.R.2830), but a



With long-sought resources now at hand, we share the responsibility to use them wisely and effectively.



Now, we have an opportunity to create jobs, stimulate economic development and protect and restore freshwater resources in the Great Lakes region.

companion bill was not approved in the Senate. Also in 2008, the EPA released its Vessel General Permit (VGP) covering discharges from U.S.- and foreign-flagged ships over 79 feet long, including ballast water. Great Lakes states, however, did not believe that the requirements under the VGP adequately protected their waters from ballast-borne invasive species, and thus added more stringent conditions to the EPA permit through the Clean Water Act Section 401 certification process. The Commission continued to maintain that a strong federal approach is critically needed to establish a uniform regulatory program for ballast water discharges.

Progress was made, however, on other AIS fronts; the Commission received a planning grant from the Great Lakes Protection Fund to focus on non-ballast AIS vectors. The project sought to identify and evaluate high-risk commercial and recreation activities and pathways contributing to AIS introduction and spread, including the role of aquaculture, live bait, aquarium and water garden industries, and other high-risk commercial activities. These are generally referred to as “organisms in trade.”

Information gained from the project will be used to guide the development of initiatives to reduce the likelihood that invasive species will be introduced or spread through organisms in trade. An advisory committee drawn from representatives of state and federal agencies, commercial interests, researchers, academia and other specialists provided overall project guidance.

In the first joint meeting of its kind, the Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species, coordinated by the Commission, held a combined session in 2008 with the Mississippi River Basin Panel. A key objective of the meeting, held in Milwaukee, was to provide a forum for communication and collaboration among members of both panels on the shared concerns of these interconnected watersheds.

The meeting focused on common priority issues, such as the transfer of AIS between basins, the recently discovered lethal fish virus viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) and ballast water. Sessions included a 20-year retrospective on lessons learned from the zebra mussel infestation in the Great Lakes, and discussions on the AIS risk presented by commercial and recreational activities other than vessel ballast water.

With demand growing in the Great Lakes region for increased reliance on alternative energy sources, the Great Lakes Commission took a leadership role in one of the most promising candidates: wind. More than 120 Great Lakes policymakers and business leaders interested in development of wind energy attended the first annual meeting of the Great Lakes Wind Collaborative, convened by the Commission in May 2008 in Buffalo, N.Y.

The Wind Collaborative was created to address issues affecting the planning, development and operation of wind power facilities in the Great Lakes region. According to recent U.S. Dept. of Energy research, the region's wind capacity has the potential to produce \$79 billion in economic activity and 765,000 lifetime jobs for the Great Lakes states, based on the construction period and 20 years of operations. Participants took part in a field trip to "Steel Winds" on the former site of the Bethlehem steel plant on the Buffalo waterfront, the largest urban wind farm in the United States. The meeting included breakout sessions on both the benefits and challenges of a responsible wind future, and discussed the Wind Collaborative's near-term agenda and long-term priorities.

Québec City's 400th anniversary celebration was the backdrop for the Great Lakes Commission's 2008 annual meeting in October. Welcoming attendees, Québec Premier Jean Charest renewed his government's commitment to wise use and management of the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence water resource as defined by the Great Lakes Basin Compact recently enacted in the United States. Charest also emphasized Québec's efforts in developing renewable energy sources while reducing greenhouse gas emissions and urged both U.S. and Canadian federal governments to be more aggressive in

these efforts. "If the U.S. and Canada put their minds together," said Charest, "we can accomplish what we want to."

Then- Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn of Illinois assumed the chairmanship of the Great Lakes Commission following elections held at the Québec City meeting, succeeding Michigan Lt. Gov. John D. Cherry, Jr. who completed a two-year term as chair. Elected vice chair was Wisconsin Commissioner Todd Ambs, administrator of the Division of Water for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.



*The Canadian Coast Guard Icebreaker CCGS Samuel Risley plows through the ice on Lake Huron.*

**2008** came to a close on a high note for the Great Lakes, with newly elected President Barack Obama and Congress weighing significant monetary infusions to the region via both the FY 2009 federal budget, and a one-time economic stimulus legislation promising billions of dollars in infrastructure improvement and job generation.

The Commission identified four specific needs in the Great Lakes for stimulus assistance: 1) repair of failing wastewater infrastructure through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund; 2) clean up of toxic sediment through the Great Lakes Legacy Act; 3) construction of a long-needed new navigation lock at Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and 4) elimination of a dredging backlog restricting access to Great Lakes ports, navigation channels and recreational harbors.

GLC Chair Pat Quinn, in a letter to the Great Lakes congressional delegation, summed up the optimism of the moment, saying, "Now, more than ever, we have an opportunity to create jobs, stimulate economic development and protect and restore fresh water resources in the eight-state Great Lakes region."