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Obama's \$475 M Great Lakes Restoration Initiative: The Right Next Step for the Nation

The following is a guest post by [Allegra Cangelosi](#), Director of Ecosystem Projects at the [Northeast-Midwest Institute](#). This article was originally published on www.HealthyLakes.org on May 19, 2009.

The Obama Administration's proposed Great Lakes Restoration Budget Initiative, if appropriated, will hit the ground running and produce near-term results. To some the proposed \$475 M investment may appear to be coming out of the blue, and therefore, to be destined for a black hole. Not so. The Great Lakes Region is ready, willing, and able to turn those dollars into visible improvements in this massive fresh water resource for the American public to enjoy. Those of us in the Ecosystem Restoration policy community nationally are aware of the extensive technical planning and organizing which has preceded this budget proposal; those of us rooted in the Great Lakes ecosystem restoration effort perhaps painfully so! The last thing the nation needs is an extension of the planning stages for restoration of this significant resource. We just need to get started with implementation, and the Obama Administration has given us a glimmer of hope that we can in FY 2010.

If anyone doubts the adequacy, depth or cohesiveness of the plans developed to date, I urge them to consult the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration website (www.glrc.us) and the resulting federal Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes (<http://www.glrc.us/strategy.html>). This unprecedented Strategy is a result of several years of data gathering and countless expert meetings and tedious interagency collaboration. It provides a comprehensive blueprint for ecosystem restoration rooted in several expansive underlying technical plans developed pursuant to state law, federal law and/or international agreement. These underlying technical plans include:

- Lakewide Management Plans for each Great Lake
- Remedial Action Plans for each Area of Concern, or highly polluted sites, developed by the EPA in keeping with a bi-national agreement with Canada
- State Wildlife Action Plans
- National Fish Habitat Action Plan, developed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries, developed by the binational Great Lakes Fishery Commission
- Upper Mississippi River/Great Lakes Joint Venture plans (North American Waterfowl Management Plan, etc.)

The federal effort to collaboratively develop a holistic Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes was launched under the Bush Administration in response to an Executive Order. All of the relevant federal agencies participated in the Bush-era process, as well as the Great Lakes Congressional delegation, tribes, cities, states, industry and the environmental community.

In preparation for the FY 2010 budget roll-out, the Obama Administration developed a list of specific “shovel ready” projects that were strictly consistent with this Strategy as targets for the FY 2010 funds. In essence, the Obama proposal for action respected the planning that took place under his predecessor, and provides a seamless transition to timely implementation.

The FY 2010 Great Lakes budget initiative is also a foundation stone for what could be a comprehensive restoration agenda for our nation’s Great Waters over the course of the Obama Administration. Indeed, signs of the administration’s interest in comprehensive water resource protection and restoration are evident in other parts of the FY 2010 budget, including the sizable bump up for the State Revolving Loan Fund for waste-water treatment improvements. If deemed successful, the funding levels proposed for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative may well be sustained and combined with similar levels of funding dedicated to Great Waters in other regions of the country in Obama Administration budgets to come. In essence, a successful outcome of this FY 2010 Great Lakes Restoration Budget Initiative will bode well for restoration nationally.

The only other major federal investment in our nation’s water resources dates to 1972, and while there must have been debate at the time, there is broad consensus now that the investment was the right thing to do. After decades of neglect, areas of the Great Lakes and other national Great Waters were practically untouchable due to direct sewage discharges. The federal government invested \$41 billion nationally in wastewater treatment infrastructure through the Clean Water Act’s Construction Grants Program; this was the largest non-military public investment since the Interstate Highways System. The outcome of the effort was a dramatic improvement in the nation’s quality of life. The Great Lakes were once again beautiful and dramatically more accessible. The job is not done, but there is a clear lesson: given a plan, public investment in environmental restoration can produce real, dramatic and visible benefits for the nation.

Serious problems in the Great Lakes ecosystem persist and new ones have emerged: fish are still unsafe for consumption by children, aquatic invasive species threaten wildlife and human health, erosion threatens magnificent shorelines, drinking water quality is still at risk. Indeed, these continuing problems inspired the multi-year planning process undertaken during the Bush Administration. Once again, like in the 1970s, a clear plan for investment of restoration dollars is there, and clear improvements are in store once the investment is made. Congress should appropriate the full FY 2010 proposed \$475 M Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. As in the 1970s, the resulting improvements in Great Lakes will be tangible, visible and appreciated by all.

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