



A Decade of Action

The Lake Erie Binational Public Forum, 1995-2005



The goal of the Lake Erie Lakewide Management Plan (LaMP) is to restore and protect the beneficial uses of Lake Erie, such as safe beaches, clean drinking water, and healthy fish and wildlife populations. The government agencies involved in the LaMP created the Lake Erie Binational Public Forum in 1995, recognizing that public input is critical to the LaMP's success.



The Forum is a unique group of interested stakeholders from Canada and the U.S., including farmers, business people, scientists, educators, anglers, boaters, environmentalists, governmental officials, labor leaders, public health workers and others. These individuals have brought together their talents, interests and concern for Lake Erie, to provide input on the planning and implementation of the LaMP, and to foster effective two-way communication with the diverse population of the Lake Erie basin. The Forum is dedicated to insuring ecosystem health, increasing stewardship, protecting unique environmental areas, enhancing public access, protecting indigenous species, encouraging public participation and promoting economically sustainable lake uses that are environmentally sound and in the public interest.

As multi-faceted as their professions are, so are the individual members themselves; representing different ages, races, ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, livelihoods and interests. Forum members also represent a broad geographical range from urban centers (Detroit and Windsor), to fishing villages (Port Stanley, Ontario) and rural areas (Little Valley, New York). Although they have many differences, Forum members share one common goal – a genuine concern for Lake Erie. It is this goal that keeps this diverse group of individuals working as a functioning unit. Like the glue that binds this unique group, their dedication and commitment to Lake Erie has kept Forum members working together even though they may have had differing opinions on issues and actions.

The group's diversity helps to assure a broad base of expertise that can be used to accomplish LaMP goals. The different experiences and concerns that Forum members bring to the table help to initiate lively and even heated debates on the issues facing the LaMP. Although there are differences among the group it is the

commonality and the belief that they are the “voice” for many other stakeholders that keeps the group working towards their goals. Though they may have ideological differences, Forum members share a respect for each other and keep an open mind during discussions and debates.

The work of the Binational Forum is primarily a voluntary effort, although some members have a direct link to the group because of their occupations. Even if job related, weekend meetings dictate that members are giving up their own time to carry on the work of the Forum. Members often drive several hours to attend Forum meetings, which are held two to three times a year on alternating sides of the border. Despite the time and distance involved, the majority of Forum members have remained active throughout the last decade, proving their interest and dedication.

What the Forum Does

The Forum has three main roles and functions including: playing a significant role in the LaMP process with real involvement and proactive initiatives; increasing stakeholder participation in the LaMP process; and implementing, facilitating and/or participating in Forum sponsored LaMP related activities at the local level. In order to accomplish these three roles and functions, the Forum acts as a partner with governments and governmental agencies in goal setting and decision making; assists the Technical Subcommittees in drafting LaMP reports and reviewing Work Group documents; provides advice and input to the Work Group and Management Committee in developing and implementing the LaMP; and promotes the Forum's vision and goals for Lake Erie. Forum members are also committed to taking information from the LaMP back to the community in a form that can be understood by the public. In this capacity, Forum members provide a valuable link to thousands of stakeholders throughout the basin who they interact with in their professional and private lives.



The Early Years

For the first several meetings Forum members worked on getting to know each other, setting up organizational rules and task groups, developing Vision and Mission statements and learning about the current state of Lake Erie. The Forum heard from US

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and Canadian experts representing agencies and universities. These presentations provided critical information for the Forum and that knowledge base has served the Forum well over the past decade. Not only did the Forum rely on outside experts to provide information, a number of Forum members themselves gave presentations on topics related to the fishery, human health, invasive species, ecology, environmental justice and Remedial Action Plans (RAPs). Although these early years represented a steep learning curve, Forum members gained the knowledge necessary to help provide critical review and commentary and serve as a conduit for information out to a larger group of stakeholders. One of the first projects that the Forum took on was an information and media blitz, whereby each Forum member agreed to disseminate information on the Lake Erie LaMP to colleagues and media outlets in their perspective home areas. For many smaller media outlets, these information packets sent out by Forum members provided important initial exposure to the LaMP and the Forum. It was the first unified effort of the Forum and it helped build momentum for other projects and actions that followed.



Our Role as Reviewers

One of the most important roles for the Forum has been to review and provide comment on documents and reports prepared by the agencies overseeing the LaMP. This Forum has eagerly taken on the responsibility of assisting the Technical Subcommittee in the drafting of LaMP reports and reviewing Work Group documents before they go to the Management Committee for review. From early efforts on reviewing the Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment reports to each of the LaMP status reports that have been prepared and distributed over the past decade, the Forum has helped to ascertain that these documents are accurate and understandable. In acting as reviewers, the Forum serves as a sounding board for the agencies involved in the LaMP process and makes them accountable for their actions. It is this accountability to the Forum and the stakeholders they represent that has helped to keep the LaMP process moving forward during years of staff cuts and lean agency budgets. Although actions to restore an ecosystem as complex as Lake Erie are often slower than hoped for, the Forum is dedicated to making sure that progress continues and the goals of the LaMP are eventually met.

Forum Task Groups

As the work of the Forum continued, it became clear that various members had interests and expertise that were quite specific. It was due to these distinct areas of specialization that several Forum Task Groups were established. Although the roles and activities of Task Groups have changed over the past 10 years, some of the more active groups include: Human Health, Education and Outreach, Pollution Prevention, Environmental Justice, Beneficial Use Impairments, Ecosystem Objectives, Roles and Objectives, Membership, Sources and Loadings and Land Use. Throughout the past decade many of these Forum Task Groups have had fact finding missions or have taken on projects that have benefited the work of the LaMP.

Some Successful Task Group Projects

Throughout the past decade many of these Forum Task Groups have had fact finding missions or have taken on projects that have benefited the work of the LaMP. For example, the Education and Outreach Task Group developed a presentation that was duplicated in overheads and on a CD-Rom that Forum members took out into their communities to educate other stakeholders about the Lake Erie LaMP and the role of the Forum. One Forum member who is an educator conducted a series of teachers' workshops entitled "Enlightening Educators About the LaMP" utilizing this presentation. Through these efforts, thousands of citizens, educators, students, environmental and community groups became aware of the Lake Erie LaMP.

The Environmental Justice Task Group focused their activities on securing funding for brochures that explain fish advisories and the steps that citizens can take to minimize their risks. Realizing that citizens in urban, poor areas often rely on Lake Erie fish as supplements to their diets, the Environmental Justice Task Group focused distribution efforts in these areas. The brochure, "A Family Guide to Eating Lake Erie Fish" has been distributed to thousands of stakeholders around the basin.

The Human Health Task Group arranged a meeting with agency scientists to discuss major issues concerning health issues and ascertained that a section on human health was included in the original LaMP document. The Land Use Task Group was involved with Phil Ryan's (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources) research on factors affecting water quality. This research looked at approximately 80 factors through an innovative technique known as a "fuzzy logic model," which indicated land use was a critical factor impacting Lake Erie. The group called for the Forum to encourage the use of "smart" urban development. Members from the agricultural community, who are part of the Land Use Task Group, called for the use of best management practices by farmers in order to reduce soil erosion and runoff. This group called for much needed economic research to prove that best management practices can benefit both farming operations and the Lake Erie watershed.



Reporting Back - Information Sharing

Forum members are involved in many activities that are not Forum initiated projects, but are related to the efforts of the group and the LaMP. Therefore, one of the duties that Forum members eagerly accept is reporting back to the group in order to share information and knowledge. Along these lines, Forum members have attended State of the Lake meetings (SOLEC), the Lake Erie at the Millennium Conference, International Association for Great Lakes Research Conferences, Remedial Action Plan meetings, Niagara River Toxic Management Plan meetings and other events and have made reports during Forum meetings. In fact, during the past decade, the Forum has supported members who have wanted to attend these conferences in order to encourage this information sharing. These activities help to keep the Forum informed of the state-of-the-art science and research being conducted around the basin.

Interacting with Stakeholders

Another role of the Forum is to interact with stakeholders from their respective geographic areas. These interactions are as varied as the Forum members themselves. Some members take the LaMP display to community events, others provide presentations to community groups, others represent the Forum at public meetings on Great Lakes issues, to mention just a few. Since several of the Forum members are teachers and professors, each year hundreds of students are made aware of the LaMP because of these members' personal involvement with the Forum. The Forum members who work for civic or environmental groups and agencies often focus their efforts on actions that support the goals of the LaMP. Whether formally or informally, Forum members work to disseminate LaMP related information and materials to other stakeholders around the basin. A website was developed for the Forum as a means of making information on the LaMP and the Forum available to a much broader group of stakeholders. The website contains information on the Forum and overviews of each of the meetings that have been held. The website can be found at: <http://erieforum.org/>

Motions and Emotions

Throughout the decade the Forum has made a number of formal motions to take actions on a variety of topics. These have included sending letters to the Management Committee to show our concern for lake water diversions, ballast water management, control of exotic species, or concern over botulism outbreaks. The Forum had used its collective voice to encourage action on many emerging issues over the past ten years to provide the push that governmental agencies occasionally need. Although the

Forum has moved as a unified group on many issues, many times the meetings are filled with emotions as members respectfully disagree on the speed or direction of steps that have been taken in the LaMP process. Since the beginning, Forum members have agreed to disagree, as long as each member has the right to share their ideas and beliefs. Over the years Forum members have also shared other emotions as we have mourned the death of members, shared concern and prayers for others that have suffered through illnesses, and celebrated joyous milestones in other members' lives.

Forum Projects

In an effort to demonstrate Lake Erie LaMP implementation at the local watershed level, the Forum chose to work with partners in a U.S. watershed (Black River, Ohio) and in a Canadian watershed (Kettle Creek, Ontario) to create community-based watershed strategies and build local capacity for ongoing ecosystem stewardship. These watershed strategies combine technical and community input, gathered through an inventory of existing information and through public meetings, dialogues with stakeholders, and guidance from local partners.

The purpose of the strategies is to:

- Prioritize environmental concerns of the local watershed communities;
- Identify activities to address these concerns that also complement the goals of the Lake Erie LaMP; and
- Build local frameworks for ongoing implementation of the identified activities.

As part of the strategy development process, the Forum also identified common issues, or barriers, to improving water quality and watershed management in each of the case study watersheds with respect to Land Use, Human Health, and Emerging Issues topic areas. Upon further research, many of the barriers identified in the case study watersheds were found to be common problems in other watershed communities throughout the Lake Erie Basin. The Forum subsequently developed a series of three reports,



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one for each topic area, that more broadly describes common concerns and provides recommendations to address those issues at the local and state level.

By conducting this process concurrently in Canadian and U.S. watersheds, the Forum hoped to identify opportunities for communities around Lake Erie to apply the experience gained through this project and to foster increased local stewardship activities that benefit the basin-wide ecosystem.

Forum Related Projects

Often members initiate projects that are related to the work of the Forum, but they are not specifically sponsored by the Forum. Although the past decade has seen several of these projects, the following are some examples of successful projects:

- Russ Piper helped to develop a Land Stewardship Catalogue Project in Ontario, that detailed successful land stewardship projects in the region.
- Terry Martin, Chief Planner and Project Manager for Advance Studies for Cattaraugus County, New York, helped to establish a local consensus that supports the need for inland communities to participate in Great Lakes watershed programs and initiatives. Martin was involved with efforts to gain a renewed recognition among major stakeholders of the importance of protecting the Cattaraugus Creek/Zoar Valley watershed for future generations, encourage inland communities to “prevent”, “mitigate,” or “remediate” problems in the watershed (including those related to land use), and develop publications related to these issues.
- David Renshaw, of Fort Erie, Ontario, worked on the development of the Niagara Water Quality Protection Strategy (NWQPS). The NWQPS is a comprehensive plan designed to address water quality and quantity issues in a sustainable manner across the 145 Niagara watersheds and over 100 creeks that drain into the three (3) primary Niagara drainage basins of Lake Erie, Niagara River and Lake Ontario.
- Helen Domske helped to develop a binational Great Lakes Student Summit that brings 250 students and teachers from Ontario, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio to Buffalo to act as “student scientists” and share their research on Lake Erie while learning about the LaMP and the environment.
- Forum members Barry Boyer and Terry Martin organized a multi-disciplinary, multi-jurisdictional partnership in support of a grant aimed at protecting the Cattaraugus Creek/Zoar Valley watershed. In 2005, this new partnership submitted a pre-proposal for a \$50,000 USEPA Great Lakes National Program Office grant that was recently approved for funding.

The Forum supports these efforts and the many others that members have been involved in that support the goals of the LaMP.

The Forum's Future

Over the past decade we have accomplished a great deal. We have learned and we have informed thousands. We have implemented projects and program, written publications and

developed presentations to support LaMP goals. We have reviewed, provided comment, encouraged, pestered, and pushed for the success of the Lake Erie LaMP. All this has occurred because a group of diverse citizens came together a decade ago and decided that a Binational Public Forum could bring about change and action. We are proud of what we have accomplished and remain determined to keep on working toward the protection and restoration of the Lake Erie ecosystem.



In Recognition

The members of the Forum are grateful for the support of FOCALerie and the Delta Institute in helping us accomplish what we have over the past decade. Dedicated professionals like Teresa Hollingsworth, Eleanor Heagy, TJ Holsen, Abigail Corso, Kate Blumberg, and Ellen Carpenter have provided excellent facilitation and kept our diverse group on track.

We would also like to recognize the members of the Management Team, LaMP Work Groups, Technical Subcommittees and agency representatives who have worked with us to meet the goals of the LaMP. Their commitment to Lake Erie's ecosystem health is laudable and the Forum is proud to partner with such dedicated men and women. In noting the support of agency representatives, we would be remiss to give special recognition to two individuals - Sandra George, Environment Canada, and Phil Ryan, Lake Erie Management Unit Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources – who deserve special recognition for their outstanding work with the Forum. They believed in the role of the Forum from the beginning and provided the critical guidance that we needed to continue our work.

Finally, we want to thank the hundreds of presenters from agencies, universities and environmental groups who have given up so many evenings and weekends to share their knowledge and commitment with us. You have educated and inspired us and we are grateful for your efforts. We remain dedicated and committed to continuing our work to achieve the goals of the LaMP and wish the day would come when the Lake Erie ecosystem was so healthy there would be no need for a Public Binational Forum!