



Investing in Great Lakes Restoration

Legislative Priority Fact Sheet
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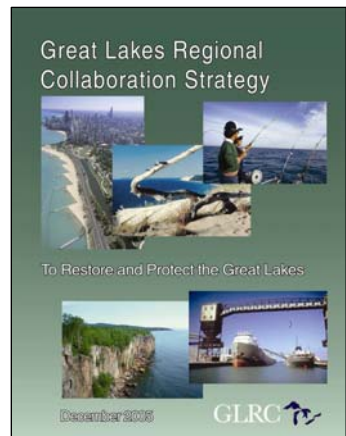


Background on the Issue

The Great Lakes are a unique and extraordinary natural resource for the region and the nation. Today, more than 32 million U.S. citizens receive the benefits of drinking water, food, a place to work and live, and transportation from the Great Lakes.

A variety of factors continue to impair the health of the Great Lakes and deterioration of the ecosystem is accelerating. As a result, Lake Erie has developed a 3,900 square mile dead zone; the zebra mussel, just one of more than 183 aquatic invasive species that have been introduced in the Great Lakes, is causing \$500 million per year in economic and environmental damage; and populations of diporeia, an important part of the Great Lakes food chain, are collapsing. Aquatic invasive species continue to arrive. At the same time, past and ongoing development has compromised Great Lakes habitats, and threatens the plants and animals that need them to survive. Many coastal areas suffer from sewer overflows that contaminate the water and cause beaches to be closed. The 31 U.S. Areas of Concern, identified more than 20 years ago, are where the most significant harm to resources has occurred. Continued pollution from nonpoint sources in the region also contribute to impaired water quality. Although releases of toxic pollutants have been reduced significantly in recent decades, there is a legacy of contamination in sediments and fish throughout the system, and mercury and other pollutants continue to enter the Great Lakes from local and distant sources.

The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC) was initiated by a federal Great Lakes Interagency Task Force in response to Presidential Executive Order 13340 in May 2004, which recognized the Great Lakes as a “national treasure” and called for the improvement of federal coordination on the Great Lakes. In December 2005, the GLRC released a strategic action plan with recommendations for protecting and restoring the Great Lakes. The Regional Collaboration was a partnership of more than 1,500 federal, state and local government officials and interested stakeholders. The restoration blueprint highlights priority actions to restore and protect the Great Lakes.



Priorities for Investment in Great Lakes Restoration

Since the release of the GLRC Strategy, the region has repeatedly called on Congress to authorize and fund programs that are essential for restoring and protecting the Great Lakes. The diverse array of federal programs included in the recommendations is described in more detail in the *Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes*, available online at www.glrc.us/strategy.html. The Great Lakes Commission reiterates the regional consensus behind the Strategy and calls on Congress to authorize and provide funding to implement its recommendations.

Specifically, the GLRC calls on the federal government to support efforts to:

- **Immediately stop the introduction of aquatic invasive species (AIS)** to prevent significant future ecological and economic damage to the Great Lakes.
- **Increase habitat conservation and species management** to sustain valuable native fish and wildlife communities, which play a critical role in maintaining ecosystem health and function, and contribute to the social and economic vitality of both the region and the nation.

- **Protect nearshore waters and coastal areas**, which are the region's largest source of drinking water and support a valuable array of recreational activities. Enhanced programs are needed to improve water infrastructure and minimize the risk to human health resulting from contact with pollution in nearshore waters.
- **Remediate Areas of Concern (AOCs)**, highly contaminated sites on the Great Lakes identified under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Of the 31 U.S. AOCs, only one has been restored to date.
- **Mitigate stressors and reduce nonpoint sources of pollution**, which contribute significantly to problems in AOCs and impair waters across the Great Lakes basin, including open waters.
- **Eliminate discharge and reduce exposure to persistent toxic substances**, which continue to stress the Great Lakes ecosystem, posing threats to human and wildlife health. Persistent toxic substances such as mercury and PCBs remain present in fish at levels that warrant advisories and restrict consumption throughout the basin.
- **Increase monitoring and coordination** to establish a sound information base and representative environmental indicators, which are needed to understand what is happening in the system. This information must then be communicated to the public, to decisionmakers and other stakeholders.
- **Ensure the long-term sustainability** of the Great Lakes resource where human activities support a strong and vibrant economy, meeting societal needs in balance with a diverse and resilient ecosystem. Essential to this desired state is a Great Lakes community that has fully embraced and routinely applies sustainability in all decisions and actions.

Progress to Date

Since its release, many important steps have been taken to implement the GLRC Strategy: collaboration partners adopted an Implementation Framework in 2006; the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act was reauthorized with significantly increased funding; and all levels of government have begun to implement portions of the Strategy while recognizing that more needs to be done. Four major regional initiatives were endorsed by the GLRC Executive Committee in 2007 and are under way in the areas of wetlands restoration, toxics reduction, aquatic invasive species and beach contaminant remediation. In addition, a recent study conducted by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative and the Great Lakes Commission shows that **local governments alone are spending an estimated \$15 billion each year on Great Lakes restoration activities**. Increased funding from the federal government is needed to implement federally authorized activities in the restoration blueprint and to match the significant investment of states and local governments, Tribes, nongovernmental organizations and private funds. The region is doing its part to ensure that restoration priorities are implemented; the federal government must step up and play an equal role.

Benefits to the Great Lakes Region

In 2007, The Brookings Institution documented the value of economic benefits that stand to be gained if the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy were implemented. The report, *Healthy Waters, Strong Economy: The Benefits of Restoring the Great Lakes Ecosystem*, estimated over **\$50 billion in long-term benefits**. Direct economic benefits from tourism, fishing and recreation alone are estimated at \$6.5 billion to \$11.8 billion. Additional high-value restoration opportunities include remediating Areas of Concern to raise coastal property values (\$12-19 billion); and implementing sediment management actions to reduce water treatment costs to municipalities (\$50-125 million). These estimates represent only a portion of the total long-term economic benefits projected by The Brookings Institution study.

Links for More Information

Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy: www.gllrc.us/strategy.html

Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative: www.gllscities.org

The Brookings Institution Great Lakes Economic Initiative: www.brookings.edu/projects/great-lakes.aspx