

# Guest Feature

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## Keep our Great Lakes great

By Congressman Vernon J. Ehlers

I will never forget one of my first committee debates in Congress dealing with the Great Lakes. A colleague was stating his opposition to a program that funded research of the Great Lakes. He argued, "Why should we fund research on the muscles of zebras?" We know, of course, this funding was not for research on zebras; rather it was to help fight a pesky invasive species in the Great Lakes known as zebra mussels. While this example is not typical of debates in Congress, it is illustrative of how hard political leaders from the Great Lakes region must work to ensure Congress' commitment to this precious resource.

Over the past thirty years, federal and state initiatives to promote the quality and health of the Great Lakes ecosystem have encouraged citizens groups, governmental agencies, and private organizations to address the pollution and conservation problems facing the Great Lakes. This commitment has helped dramatically improve the Lakes' water quality and has increased restoration and conservation efforts. Yet, significant challenges remain that will require continued leadership from both the people of the Great Lakes basin and Congress. In particular, I am concerned about invasive species, diversion of water from the Lakes, and ongoing water quality degradation due to pollution. We must continue to educate citizens about these challenges in order to make preservation and restoration of the Great Lakes a priority for all Americans.

Many years ago, citizens of the Great Lakes Basin had not yet heard of zebra mussels, lamprey eels, and round goby, because they are not native to the Lakes. Today, these nuisance species are thriving in the Great Lakes, requiring billions of dollars annually to address damage they cause. We must continue to fund research so we can understand how these species invade the Lakes, how we can control them in cost-effective ways and mitigate the damage they cause, and how we can prevent other invasive species from entering the Great Lakes Basin. I have supported, and will continue to support, congressional funding for research initiatives to control or prevent the presence of non-native species in the Great Lakes.

I am not only concerned about what enters our Lakes, but also what leaves them. In 1998, the Ontario Provincial government approved a permit for a private company to siphon off water from the Great Lakes and ship it to China. (Fortunately, the permit was soon withdrawn.) Southwestern states look enviously at our ample fresh water and dream of piping it to fill their reservoirs. Working with my colleagues in the House, I want to ensure that other countries and states respect our control over our waters and that the fresh water within the Great Lakes is not diverted to other regions.



We must dedicate resources to clean our Lakes. Through the efforts of government, private citizens, activist groups, and businesses our Lakes are already getting cleaner. But there is still much to be done. Working with regional, community, and industry groups, as well as U.S. EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office, I have introduced the Great Lakes Legacy Act of 2001. The legislation has garnered the support from a broad spectrum of constituencies, including the Sierra Club, Lake Michigan Federation and the Council of Great Lakes Industries.

This legislation would authorize the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to issue \$50 million in annual grants over five years for remediation of contaminated sediment in Areas of Concern (AOC), prevention of further or renewed contamination of sediment, and long-term monitoring of such sediment. These much-needed funds will help restore water quality in areas where contaminated sediments persist.

These grants will enable substantial progress to be made in cleaning up toxic "hot spots" identified by the governments of the United States and Canada under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Many local organizations and units of government have taken the lead to spearhead cleaning up these AOCs. However, many efforts have been hampered by the mounting costs. This Act would provide grants with the requirement that there be matching funds of at least 35 percent of the project cost. Therefore, not only is the Act environmentally responsible, it is also fiscally responsible.

There are many different citizens groups, programs, government agencies, and research efforts working on Great Lakes initiatives. These collective efforts embody our commitment to the Great Lakes and give us the tools we must use to preserve our nation's Great Lakes for the future. I will continue to do everything possible to ensure that our Great Lakes remain great! ✍

*Vern Ehlers is a Republican Member of Congress from Michigan. The first research physicist in Congress, Ehlers serves as chair of the Science Committee Subcommittee on Environment, Technology and Standards, and has co-authored two books on the environment.*