



Strategic Plan *for the* Great Lakes Commission

— 2017 – 2022 —

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Introduction

The Great Lakes Commission is a public agency established by the Great Lakes Basin Compact in 1955 to help its Member states speak with a unified voice and collectively fulfill their vision for a healthy, vibrant Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region. The Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec joined the Commission as associate members via a Declaration of Partnership in 1999. The Compact created the Commission to implement its terms and requirements, as noted in Article I:

1. To promote the orderly, integrated, and comprehensive development, use, and conservation of the water resources of the Great Lakes Basin.
2. To plan for the welfare and development of the water resources of the Basin as a whole as well as for those portions of the Basin which may have problems of special concern.
3. To make it possible for the states of the Basin and their people to derive the maximum benefit from utilization of public works, in the form of navigational aids or otherwise, which may exist or which may be constructed from time to time.
4. To advise in securing and maintaining a proper balance among industrial, commercial, agricultural, water supply, residential, recreational, and other legitimate uses of the water resources of the Basin.

Collectively, these terms and the rest of the Compact consistently speak to the intertwining of economic uses of water resources, conservation and the creation of an organization to lead a path that strikes a balance among multiple uses.

Vision

The Great Lakes Commission is a binational leader and a trusted voice ensuring the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River support a healthy environment, vibrant economy and high quality of life for current and future generations.

Mission

The Great Lakes Commission represents, advises and assists its member states and provinces by fostering dialogue, developing consensus, facilitating collaboration and speaking with a unified voice to advance collective interests and responsibilities to promote economic prosperity and environmental protection and to achieve the balanced and sustainable use of Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin water resources.

Values

The following core values guide the work of the Great Lakes Commission and set the standards that we aspire to achieve in serving our member states and provinces.

- **Member led:** We are guided by and serve the common interests of our member states and provinces.
- **Regional perspective:** We bring a regional perspective to federal, state and provincial programs, policies, projects and priorities.
- **Leadership:** We are ambassadors for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region and serve as liaisons within and beyond the region.
- **Collaboration:** We advance our objectives in close coordination with the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, the International Joint Commission, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, and constant dialogue with other regional institutions and relevant entities.
- **Partnerships:** We respect the roles of other regional institutions and agencies and collaborate to achieve common goals and interests.
- **Transparency:** We are open and transparent in carrying out our work.
- **Integrity:** We strive for the highest levels of honesty, credibility and accuracy in the information, recommendations and perspectives that we convey.
- **Objective:** We are nonpartisan, balanced and science-based in our work, while promoting a vision of a healthy environment and vibrant economy, pursued by each of our member states and provinces.
- **Open-minded:** We are inclusive and welcome diverse views.
- **Sustainability:** We incorporate principles of sustainable development and adaptive management in our work.

Core Competencies

The Great Lakes Commission is uniquely equipped to serve its member states and provinces with the following core services, which constitute the skills, knowledge base, professional competencies and leadership attributes that are applied across all of its program areas. The core competencies are *how* the Commission conducts its work to achieve its goals, fulfill its mission and advance its vision.

Communications and Outreach: The Commission raises awareness; communicates with federal, state/provincial, and local agencies and stakeholders; and provides information technologies and outreach services to support effective decision-making and stewardship.

Information Management and Delivery: The Commission collects, integrates and makes accessible high quality and unbiased data and information to enable its member jurisdictions and other parties to develop sound policies, manage and adapt programs, and make informed decisions affecting the water resources of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region.

Facilitation and Consensus Building: The Commission facilitates, convenes and participates in forums that address issues of interest to its members. By serving as a neutral broker of information and research and facilitating dialogue among diverse perspectives, it helps build consensus on solutions to challenges and opportunities facing Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River water resources.

Policy Coordination and Advocacy: The Commission helps its member states and provinces speak with a common voice by coordinating, analyzing, advising, communicating and advocating shared policy priorities. The Commission also collaborates with other regional, national and international organizations to advance common interests.

Regional Project Management: The Commission secures resources and coordinates activities that address common interests of its member jurisdictions and provides the capacity to manage projects and administer funding to member states, provinces and other partners to advance shared goals.

Program Areas

The Great Lakes Commission designs the work of its programs to support its goals and vision. The Goals articulate general outcomes we hope to achieve through our collective work across all Program Areas. Each of the Program Areas includes one Objective and, under each, a series of Strategic Actions that indicate what the Commission seeks to accomplish, while recognizing that the Commission's work alone will not completely fulfill these Objectives. The strategic actions reflect what the Commission does and the projects and activities the Commission will undertake to address its goals, objectives and fulfill its mission over the next five years.

Goals

The Great Lakes Commission's goals articulate the *outcomes* it seeks to advance over the five-year timeframe of its strategic plan by building on its mission and vision and working in partnership with its member states and provinces and other entities.

- Businesses, communities and agriculture leverage water resources as assets to support strong economies and a high quality of life for residents.
- Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River water resources are protected from pollution and impacts from climate change; are accessible to people; provide high quality drinking water; and are managed in a balanced and sustainable manner for the benefit of current and future generations.
- Aquatic habitats support diverse and healthy fish and wildlife populations, are protected from the negative impacts of aquatic invasive species, and provide cultural and economic benefits to local communities.
- Harbors and waterways support recreational uses and a Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River maritime transportation system that efficiently moves goods and enhances the competitiveness of the region's economy and international trade.

1. Water Quality

Challenges and Opportunities:

The Great Lakes basin's abundant supply of clean, fresh water is vital to the regional economy and the health of its communities. Recognizing this, federal, state and provincial laws have been designed to ensure that water quality is sufficient to allow for a safe and sustainable public water supply, water-dependent economic activities, agriculture, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and water-related tourism and recreation. Additionally, water quality is increasingly linked to water quantity, in particular as governments address the threat of climate change. With expert knowledge of water issues and strong relationships with water quality practitioners across many sectors, the Commission is well-positioned to identify and share innovative solutions to water quality challenges, and to advance regional approaches to water quality protection and improvement. The Commission will utilize its expertise and capacity to maximize its members' collective impact to improve and protect water quality in urban and urbanizing areas; in rural and agricultural areas; and other diverse stakeholders within sub-watersheds across the basin.

Objective: Identify, promote, and share innovative solutions to water quality challenges in both urban and rural settings, and advance approaches that encourage collective action to protect and improve water quality across diverse landscapes within watersheds.

Strategic Actions:

- Protect and improve water quality by: leading and partnering on projects; facilitating dialogue and building consensus; and delivering information that improves the region’s ability to measure progress on water quality protection and improvement. Lead the ErieStat project to track progress toward the shared goal of reducing phosphorus into western Lake Erie by 40% by 2025 and begin a drinking water supply pilot as part of the Blue Accounting initiative.
- Protect and improve water quality in urban and urbanizing areas by leading and partnering on green infrastructure projects and related activities, such as the Green Infrastructure Technology Transfer Collaborative, that can create enabling conditions to restore the fractured water cycle.
- Protect and improve water quality in rural and agricultural areas by leading and partnering on projects and activities that reduce sediment and nutrient loads into Great Lakes basin waters through ongoing partnerships with NRCS, conservation districts, authorities and agricultural interests. Work will range from administering funds to reduce sediment and nutrient runoff to leading or supporting projects that advance traditional and innovative approaches to manage sediment and nutrient loading in Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) priority watersheds and watershed-based solutions across the basin.
- Explore opportunities to support the states and provinces in tackling complex aspects of water quality, including water quality trading and other market-based approaches, leveraging the region’s abundant clean fresh water assets to advance more sustainable methods of agricultural production, and linking urban/urbanizing landscapes with rural/agricultural landscapes to improve water quality across entire watersheds.
- Support the states and provinces in planning and adapting to water quality implications of climate change.
- Address critical water quality challenges, such harmful algal blooms, by facilitating regional forums, including collaboratives, such as the Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) Collaboratory, and participating in others, such as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement’s annexes, to build consensus around shared water quality goals and associated solutions to achieve those goals.
- Advocate for refinements to U.S. federal policy and legislation to protect and improve water quality, including the U.S. Clean Water Act, the U.S. Safe Drinking Water Act, the U.S. Water Resources Development Act, and the U.S. Farm Bill.

2. Water Management and InfrastructureChallenges and Opportunities:

Strengthening the effective management of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin water resources to meet the needs of the region’s citizens continues to be a top priority of Great Lakes governors and premiers. Due to its history, mandate and expertise the Great Lakes Commission is uniquely qualified to lead and support efforts in this area, and has already assisted the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers in implementing the regional water resources agreements. At the local level, aging and degraded water infrastructure (drinking, storm and wastewater) is increasingly threatening communities’ access to this valuable freshwater resource. Water and wastewater infrastructure challenges are exacerbated by climate change impacts, such as increased runoff caused by more severe and frequent storm events, that often lead to increased flooding, sanitary and storm sewer overflows, and risks to public health and the health of the Great Lakes. The Commission has supported innovative projects focused on maximizing investments in water conservation and green infrastructure to support water management, and is working to establish new partnerships, identify new solutions to water infrastructure challenges, develop tools to support decision-making, and better manage data and information in these areas. Additionally, the Commission’s advocacy program continues to promote federal programs, policies and funding to help states, provinces and local communities

manage water infrastructure. As water quantity and quality issues are inextricably linked, the Commission's work in this area complements efforts under the water quality program area.

Objective: Ensure that the waters of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin continue to support the needs of communities, businesses, industries and ecology; are protected from development impacts, pollution, climate change and other stressors; and are managed in a balanced and sustainable manner for the use, benefit and enjoyment of people today and future generations.

Strategic Actions:

- In partnership with the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, support decision-making and measure progress under the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Sustainable Water Resources Agreement and Water Resources Compact by compiling, interpreting and disseminating consistent water withdrawal, diversion and consumptive use information; supporting the cumulative impact assessment called for under the Compact and the Agreement; and providing information on regional trends and state and provincial programs, practices and policies related to water use and conservation.
- Lead and engage in the development and dissemination of data and information necessary for implementing drinking, storm and wastewater management programs that identify critical needs and advance solutions to the benefit of public health and safety, water infrastructure and delivery, ecosystem health and water quality.
- Identify and advance solutions to water management and infrastructure challenges by facilitating forums, initiatives and partnerships including the Commission's working group on water infrastructure.
- Raise awareness of the fundamental value of water and the need for infrastructure improvements by advocating for federal legislation and funding to support and accelerate drinking, storm and wastewater infrastructure improvements through the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund programs and other water management programs and by promoting the benefits of integrating water delivery and wastewater management services to the states, provinces and municipalities in the region.

3. Commercial Navigation

Challenges and Opportunities:

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River maritime transportation system is vital to the economies of the United States and Canada. The system facilitates domestic and international trade through the movement of goods and commodities, while creating jobs in port communities and supporting industries such as manufacturing, steel production, agribusiness and power generation. Ensuring the continued viability of commercial navigation requires maintaining and investing in harbors, ports, shipping channels, locks and related infrastructure throughout the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River system, including regular dredging. These activities require close regional and binational coordination, given the interdependent nature of the system and the critical role played by key infrastructure like the Soo Locks and the St. Lawrence Seaway. The Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers recently completed a comprehensive strategy for the navigation system that aims to double maritime trade, improve environmental performance and support the region's industrial core. The strategy recommends actions to maintain and expand the maritime transportation system and establishes a Regional Maritime Entity to coordinate state and provincial actions. With its dual mandate for both economic development and environmental protection, and its longstanding role as an advocate for Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River maritime transportation, the Great Lakes Commission is uniquely qualified to support the objectives of the governors' and premiers' new maritime strategy.

Objective: Improve the efficiency, competitiveness, security and sustainability of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River maritime transportation system to support the regional and national economies of the United States and Canada.

Strategic Actions:

- Collaborate with the Regional Maritime Entity and other stakeholders to support implementation of the governors' and premiers' *Strategy for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Maritime Transportation System*, with a focus on establishing a maritime careers portal, maintaining the maritime asset inventory, managing data and information to track progress in implementing the strategy and aligning data collection and reporting with the Blue Accounting initiative.
- In collaboration with the Regional Maritime Entity and other stakeholders, identify and advocate for priorities to maintain and strengthen the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River maritime transportation system, including allocating funds from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund; constructing a new large lock at the Soo Locks; dredging to maintain authorized depths of channels and harbors and additional depth needed in critical areas; repairing and investing in aging navigation infrastructure; ensuring adequate icebreaking capacity; developing sustainable strategies for managing dredged material; and supporting the development of technologies to improve the system's environmental performance.
- Convene or participate in regional partnerships, forums and initiatives related to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River maritime transportation system, including the Regional Maritime Entity, Great Lakes Dredging Team, Great Ships Initiative, and the Great Lakes Small Harbors Coalition.

4. Economic Development and Waterfront Community RevitalizationChallenges and Opportunities:

The unique freshwater resources of the Great Lakes fueled the region's early development, with waterfront areas historically serving as centers of economic activity. Currently, many Great Lakes coastal communities are working to restore and reclaim degraded or under-utilized waterfronts and leverage them to support economic development, recreation and other purposes. The GLRI is accelerating this process, particularly in the Areas of Concern. Recreational boating and other water-based activities drive a vibrant tourism and outdoor recreation sector centered on the Great Lakes and their tributaries. Regional leaders have recognized the potential of fresh water and the "Blue Economy" to promote economic growth, attract and retain talent, support water-dependent industries, and sustain a high quality of life in the Great Lakes region. The Great Lakes Commission is well suited to develop tools and support strategies to advance waterfront community revitalization through research, policy development, information exchange and technology transfer, and stakeholder collaboration. The Commission is also uniquely positioned to advocate for federal, state and provincial policies, programs and funding to support efforts to restore and revitalize waterfront areas, ensure resiliency to impacts from climate change, and balance environmental and economic benefits from water resources. Finally, the Commission can collaborate with regional leaders to strengthen the economy and promote the Great Lakes region as a global center for research and development of technologies to utilize and manage freshwater resources.

Objective: Support the efforts of the states and provinces – in collaboration with federal agencies, local communities, and nongovernmental stakeholders – to restore and revitalize waterfront areas and advance policies, programs and funding to leverage water resources to support a strong regional economy and high quality of life.

Strategic Actions:

- Support research, disseminate information, and collaborate with regional leaders to quantify the economic value of Great Lakes water resources, the return on investments in environmental restoration and water-related infrastructure, and the ecosystem benefits and services generated by the Great Lakes, and facilitate a cooperative, regional approach to advancing the "Blue Economy."
- Support the work of the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers' regional economic task force, and collaborate with other partners such as the Council of Great Lakes Industries and the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition, to strengthen water-related infrastructure, industries and

commerce and facilitate a cooperative approach to improve regional economic performance and competitiveness.

- Support implementation of the GLRI and other regional programs to clean up and restore waterfront areas, and advance policies, funding and information exchange to assist the states, provinces and local communities in strategically leveraging water resources to strengthen local economies and provide benefits for residents and visitors.
- Advocate with Congress and federal agencies for programs, policies and funding that support state and local efforts to clean up and revitalize waterfront areas, including the GLRI, Coastal Zone Management Act, National Sea Grant College Program, and brownfields redevelopment programs, and assist in effectively implementing these programs and linking them with state and provincial priorities.
- Collaborate with other water-related commissions in the U.S., Canada, and abroad to share information, exchange strategies, and advance common goals directed at solving problems affecting water resources and leveraging them as vital regional assets.

5. Coastal Conservation and Habitat Restoration

Challenges and Opportunities:

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin includes more than 10,000 miles of coastline, with the majority of the region's population and economic activities located in coastal areas. These areas support both rich and diverse ecosystems and valuable industrial, recreational and tourism economies. However, in some areas extensive human activity has led to the loss of habitat for fish and wildlife and impacts to key ecosystem functions and values. The Commission is well positioned to assist the states, provinces and local partners in balancing the use and conservation of natural resources by restoring and protecting habitat for fish and wildlife; supporting the remediation of degraded areas; and ensuring resiliency to changing lake levels and impacts from climate change. The Commission is also developing and managing several collaborative partnerships to coordinate regional engagement, improve management, advance research, and facilitate communication and outreach to address coastal conservation challenges.

Objective: Conserve coastal ecosystem functions and values that contribute to the diversity, resilience and economy of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin by protecting natural communities that sustain populations of desirable fish and wildlife species; restoring degraded areas; and managing coastal resources to improve ecosystem services while supporting sustainable economic development.

Strategic Actions:

- Lead and support regional programs that restore, protect and manage valuable habitat and water resources through implementation of the NOAA-GLC Regional Partnership in Areas of Concern, and in coordination with U.S. EPA, NOAA, states and provinces, and local organizations.
- Elevate awareness of coastal conservation issues among decision-makers, managers, researchers and the public by convening meetings, coordinating action and developing communication products such as websites, webinars, and publications.
- Explore and develop data and information-sharing opportunities to support ongoing coastal wetland restoration prioritization, contribute to decision-making and measure progress on coastal conservation and habitat restoration across the region.
- Communicate with partners including U.S. EPA, NOAA, USGS, NRCS, Great Lakes Fishery Commission, Great Lakes Landscape Conservation Cooperative and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement Annex 7 Subcommittee, to ensure effective coordination and collaboration with state and provincial agencies,

agriculture producers, conservation groups and local partners in support of sound land management practices and strategically targeted fish and wildlife restoration and conservation actions.

- Advocate for legislation and funding for federal programs, policies and laws, such as the GLRI, the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act and the Farm Bill, and support their effective implementation and alignment with state and provincial priorities.

6. Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention and Control

Challenges and Opportunities:

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are recognized as one of the most significant threats to the environmental and economic health of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River region. Progress is being made to reduce threats of new invasions and the damage from those species already introduced. Yet, the region remains vulnerable to AIS introduction and spread from various pathways and AIS threats are likely to evolve under a changing climate. AIS do not respect political boundaries and states and provinces vary in their approaches and capacity for prevention and management. Preventing new AIS introductions and controlling those already present is a priority for regional leaders. The Commission is well-positioned to coordinate multijurisdictional approaches to AIS prevention and control. Commission staff is equipped with an in-depth knowledge of AIS issues and strong relationships with AIS practitioners from both the public and private sector. The Commission's AIS expertise is founded in its historic relationship with the Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species. The Commission will utilize its expertise and capacity to advance effective, regional solutions for AIS prevention and control.

Objective: Prevent the introduction and spread, and when necessary, advance the management and control of aquatic invasive species, that are or have the potential to negatively impact water resources or the economy of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin.

Strategic Actions:

- Develop and promote communication products and services, including websites, webinars, and publications (e.g., *Great Lakes Aquatic Invasions*) that provide AIS information and advance progress on AIS prevention and control.
- Develop and promote the use of adaptive management frameworks and data and information integration platforms in order to support decision making (including evaluating costs and benefits) and measure progress on AIS prevention and control across the region.
- Facilitate regional forums and collaboratives working to advance effective and coordinated approaches to AIS prevention and control, including the Great Lakes Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species, the Chicago Area Waterway System Advisory Committee, and the Great Lakes Phragmites and Invasive Mussel collaboratives, among others.
- Collaborate with other partner groups engaged in AIS prevention and control to support and advance common AIS priorities, including the GLWQA Annex 6 Subcommittee, the Conference of Great Lakes Governors and Premiers AIS Task Force, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, the International Joint Commission, the federal Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, and other regional ANS panels, among others.
- Advocate for legislation and funding to support effective implementation of federal programs, policies and laws, such as the National Invasive Species Act, Lacey Act, GLRI, and Asian Carp Action Plan.
- Lead regional projects that advance policies and solutions to reduce the risk of AIS introduction and spread through priority pathways including internet sales of organisms in trade, canals and waterways and ballast water.

7. Information Management and Blue Accounting

Challenges and Opportunities:

The Great Lakes Basin Compact charged the Commission to “collect, correlate, interpret, and report on data relating to the water resources and the use thereof in the Basin or any portion thereof.” Since its inception, the Commission has been a trusted source of information through many programs including the Great Lakes Information Network. Through this program area, the Commission develop the foundation for supporting all other program areas outlined in the Compact, and continue to assemble, curate, manage and deliver information to support the conservation and balanced use of the Great Lakes. A core component of this program area is the Blue Accounting initiative (<http://BlueAccounting.org>), a partnership between the Commission and The Nature Conservancy. Blue Accounting will provide Great Lakes leaders with information services that measure the progress being made across the region toward shared desired outcomes for the Great Lakes.

Objective: The Commission’s member states and provinces have access to high-quality, curated information about Great Lakes issues from a neutral and authoritative source.

Strategic Actions:

- Deliver consistent, continuous and unbiased information to the Commission’s member states and provinces on issues and outcomes of mutual interest and concern including the support of other Commission Program Areas described in this Strategic Plan.
- Establish Blue Accounting as a leading information service to track the region’s progress towards shared goals and outcomes using consistent data, metrics and methods, working with The Nature Conservancy and other partners in both countries. Specifically, provide support to the Source Water Initiative and ErieStat, described in the Water Quality Program Area, as a Blue Accounting pilot projects.
- Develop and maintain mutually-beneficial relationships with agencies and entities across the region, in both nations, at federal, state, provincial, tribal/First Nations, local and municipal scales to coordinate information management and provide information to the Commission for use by its members.
- Support and enhance the efforts of Annex 10 of the GLWQA, the IJC’s Science Priority Committee and the Great Lakes Advisory Board’s Science and Information Subcommittee to improve information coordination and flow between entities and agencies in the Great Lakes region.
- Coordinate and provide information to support spill prevention and response programs, working with U.S. EPA across the Great Lakes basin and continuing current work with the Region 5 Regional Response Team to build intergovernmental relationships that improve planning and make response efforts more efficient.
- Provide facilitation and information management services to support development of strategies and policies to assure protection of the region’s water resources in the context of increases in North American oil production and associated oil transportation to and through the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River region.

Conclusion

The Commission is committed to constantly improving its organizational processes and using the best metrics available to evaluate projects and services to its member jurisdictions. More specific plans to implement these actions and metrics to measure progress and allocate financial resources will be developed following completion of the plan. We will provide reports on progress to GLC Commissioners twice a year. We will assess progress and address emerging issues annually.