

For immediate release

Sept. 10, 2013

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Great Lakes Commission tackles water levels, dredging backlog, Waukesha diversion and oil transportation

Milwaukee, Wis. – The Annual Meeting of the Great Lakes Commission, which concluded yesterday in Milwaukee, featured spirited dialogue on water levels, the growing dredging backlog on the Great Lakes, which is impeding commercial and recreational navigation, and an action item to tackle the potential benefits and risks of oil transportation in the region.

GLC Chair Kenneth G. Johnson opened the meeting by highlighting the importance of partnerships in protecting and restoring the Great Lakes. “Cleanup of the Sheboygan River Area of Concern and the Kinnickinnic River area here in Milwaukee would not have been possible without Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding and a vested partnership between federal, state and local organizations,” Johnson said. “These are success stories that we must build on.”

The causes of fluctuating water levels and the various impacts on Great Lakes environments and economies was explored by a panel of experts including Scudder Mackey, Ohio Dept. of Natural Resources Office of Coastal Management; Deborah Lee, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Roger Gauthier, Restore Our Water International; and Dan Injerd, Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources.

Several agencies, including the International Joint Commission and the Great Lakes Commission, have called for additional studies to investigate whether remediating the causes of water loss in the St. Clair River are worth the costs, benefits and risks.

According to Gauthier, when you look at the water balance of the lakes, Michigan-Huron is significantly out of whack, which substantiates that the outlet is increasing. “The conveyance of the St. Clair River has increased up to 16 percent,” Gauthier explained, recommending that compensating structural controls be placed in the St. Clair River. “Previous dredging has exacerbated erosion in the riverbed by removing cobble from the St. Clair River bottom and exposing clay.”

Injerd noted that if compensation had happened back in the 1960s, the flooding in the 1980s on Lake Michigan might have been much worse. “Controlling the water levels on Lakes Michigan-Huron is a tricky business,” he warned. “It’s difficult to know what the optimal water levels are, and upstream and downstream impacts must also be considered.”

Although the panel concurred that maintaining inherent fluctuations is good for the Great Lakes ecosystem, in

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Great Lakes Commission

Kenneth G. Johnson (WI), Chair; Tim A. Eder, Executive Director

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general, Gauthier noted that structural options would eliminate extreme water level fluctuations. The panel also agreed that climate change impacts are potentially much larger than current science is foreseeing.

Betty Sutton, newly appointed administrator of the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, provided a keynote address.

The Commission was also briefed by Dan Duchniak, general manager of the Waukesha Water Utility, on his city's water needs. Due to exceedances of radium in their existing groundwater supply, a pending Waukesha proposal will request 10.1 million gallons per day of water withdrawal from Lake Michigan. Since Waukesha straddles the Great Lakes basin boundary, its proposal will be the first real test of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact, which became law in 2008.

The GLC passed resolutions concerning:

- **Priorities for the Great Lakes navigation system in the federal Water Resources Development Act** to ensure new WRDA legislation includes provisions that restore, maintain and strengthen the economic vitality of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Navigation System for commercial and recreational transportation
- **Support for Great Lakes offshore wind demonstration (pilot) projects**, recognizing that small-scale demonstration (pilot) projects are the most direct means of assessing potential environmental impacts, and evaluating economic viability and opportunities for job creation involving offshore wind projects
- **Preventing pollution from persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic chemicals in the Great Lakes ecosystem**, which urges the U.S. Congress to adopt comprehensive national legislation aimed at minimizing human and ecosystem exposure to PBTs through reform of the Toxic Substances Control Act
- **Recognizing rivermouths: Places vital to the Great Lakes basin that deserve focused restoration and conservation**, which urges the U.S. Congress and U.S. and Canadian federal agencies to explicitly recognize the ecological importance of rivermouths

The GLC states and provinces also passed an action item directing staff to prepare an issue brief evaluating the potential economic benefits, risks and options for mitigating risks surrounding the transportation of crude oil in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region.

Current Chair Kenneth G. Johnson, water division administrator at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and Vice Chair Kelly Burch, director of the Northwest Regional Office of the Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Protection, were re-elected.

The GLC meeting kicked off Great Lakes Week 2013, which continues through Sept. 12 in Milwaukee.

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Kenneth G. Johnson, water division administrator at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, is an interstate compact agency established under state and U.S. federal law and dedicated to promoting a strong economy, healthy environment and high quality of life for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence region and its residents. The Commission consists of governors' appointees, state legislators, and agency officials from its eight member states. Associate membership for Ontario and Québec was established through the signing of a "Declaration of Partnership." The Commission maintains a formal Observer program involving U.S. and Canadian federal agencies, tribal authorities, binational agencies and other regional interests. The Commission offices are located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Learn more at www.glc.org.