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Contact: Tim Eder
Phone: 734-971-9135
E-mail: teder@glc.org

Low water levels and deteriorating Great Lakes infrastructure top priorities of Great Lakes Commission

Washington, D.C. – 100-year-old water resources infrastructure, built before World War I, is trying to serve 20th century needs in the Great Lakes region. Delegates to the Great Lakes Commission’s Semiannual Meeting, which concluded today in Washington, D.C, will now be descending on Capitol Hill to impress upon lawmakers the importance of investments in infrastructure, ecosystem protection and restoration.

The January 2013 monthly mean for lakes Michigan and Huron was the lowest that has ever been recorded, dating back to the early 1900s. Michigan-Huron levels rose slightly in February 2013 but, according to Keith Kompoltowicz, hydrology chief for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-Detroit District, long-range forecasts illustrate that the lakes will remain near or below their long-term averages over the next six months.

As water levels decline, piers and docks are exposed to the elements, further deteriorating this core infrastructure. Midwest Energy Resources Company President Fred Shusterich, representing the Great Lakes Maritime Task Force, noted that lower budgets, no earmarks, failing infrastructure, more sedimentation and lower water levels are leading to a crisis for the Great Lakes maritime industry.

Ken Alvey, president of the Lake Erie Marine Trades Association, echoed the concerns: Record low water levels and no significant dredging since 2010 is having severe economic costs on the region’s harbors.

The Great Lakes Commission (GLC) also released its 2013 federal legislative priorities today, just as the effects of sequestration are beginning to impact U.S. federal budgets and agencies.

Priorities for the GLC and its member states include:

- Sustaining progress under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)
- Passing comprehensive legislation to strengthen Great Lakes conservation efforts
- Strengthening protections against Asian carp and other aquatic invasive species
- Addressing the crisis facing commercial navigation and recreational harbors in the Great Lakes
- Helping communities upgrade aging water infrastructure
- Reauthorizing the Farm Bill with strong conservation provisions

Great Lakes Commission

Kenneth G. Johnson (WI), Chair; Tim A. Eder, Executive Director
Eisenhower Corporate Park • 2805 S. Industrial Hwy. Suite 100 • Ann Arbor, Michigan • 48104-6791
734-971-9135 • Fax: 734-971-9150 • Web: www.glc.org
Illinois • Indiana • Michigan • Minnesota • New York • Ohio • Ontario • Pennsylvania • Québec • Wisconsin

GLC Commissioners noted the recent successful delisting of the Presque Isle Area of Concern in Erie, Pa. but voiced grave concerns about dredging needs due to declining water levels and harmful algal blooms, which have been prevalent in recent years in western Lake Erie.

“Good things are happening in the Great Lakes but many challenges remain,” said GLC Chairman Kenneth G. Johnson, water division administrator at the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources. “I’m personally excited about the fine work done recently at the Sheboygan River and delisting this Area of Concern in the near future,” Johnson said. “Partnerships and local involvement will continue to be important to realize Great Lakes restoration goals.”

The GLC unveiled a new website “Great Lakes Restoration At Work” that maps more than 1,000 Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) projects that are underway in the region. The site, available at www.glc.org/restore/glrimap, includes additional map overlays of congressional districts and state and county boundaries.

In addition to endorsing its legislative priorities, the GLC passed resolutions supporting cooperative and flexible nonpoint source conservation programs for the Great Lakes, phase II of the GLRI, and new comprehensive Great Lakes legislation to formally authorize the GLRI, the Great Lakes Legacy Act and related programs.

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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.