

For immediate release
March 26, 2015

Contact: Heather Braun
Office: 734-971-9135
Email: hbrown@glc.org

Bear Lake restoration work commences in Muskegon Lake Area of Concern

Muskegon, Mich. – The Great Lakes Commission has received new funding to support ecological restoration efforts in Muskegon Lake by removing sediments that contain harmful levels of phosphorus, restoring natural water flow and creating wetlands in Bear Creek, a tributary to Muskegon Lake in west Michigan.

The \$7.9 million project will restore almost 36 acres of wetlands and improve water flow and fish passage to Muskegon Lake as part of a larger program to complete Muskegon Lake restoration efforts by 2017. The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) is partnering with the Great Lakes Commission and will lead the project's local implementation.

Kathy Evans, environmental program manager from WMSRDC stated: "This project will be instrumental to the overall health of Muskegon Lake by removing harmful sediments and creating the conditions that native fish and wildlife need to thrive in these waterways."

A partnership of community groups and government agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Michigan's Office of the Great Lakes, have been working since 1992 to clean up and restore Muskegon Lake, which was designated as an Area of Concern (AOC) in 1985 due to the presence of contaminated sediments, degraded habitat and other environmental problems.

The Bear Creek project is the latest to be initiated by the Great Lakes Commission, WMSRDC and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which have partnered together since 2008 to conduct multiple large-scale habitat restoration projects at Muskegon Lake. This new project along Bear Creek will remove almost 150,000 tons of harmful sediment from wetlands along Bear Creek, reconnect waterways and fish passage to Bear Lake and Muskegon Lake, and improve 2,000 feet of stream bank.

The project is supported by a grant from NOAA through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). A key focus is cleaning up "toxic hotspots" designated as AOCs.

-more-

Great Lakes Commission

Kelvin Burch (PA), 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

“NOAA is pleased to continue this partnership and support the incredible work taking place in Areas of Concern around the Great Lakes,” said Julie Sims, Regional Coordinator for NOAA's Restoration Center. “The progress made in Muskegon Lake is a model for other AOCs and partnerships around the country.”

Muskegon Lake is on schedule to be cleaned up and removed – or “delisted” – as an AOC in 2017 after the completion of remaining restoration projects.

According to Tim Eder, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission, the Great Lakes Commission is proud to support projects like the Bear Creek restoration.

“This is a wonderful example of federal, state and local agencies working together to create both economic and ecological benefits for west Michigan and the Great Lakes,” Eder said. “By restoring wetlands along Bear Creek we are creating opportunities for native species to thrive and for the surrounding community to benefit from valuable fresh water resources.”

Restoration at Bear Creek is scheduled to start in 2015 and be completed by 2016. In 2012, NOAA funded the engineering and design for the project, which highlighted the negative impact that phosphorus from Bear Lake has on Muskegon Lake. One of the barriers to delisting Muskegon Lake as an AOC is eutrophication, or an unnaturally high level of nutrients, from high phosphorus levels in Bear Lake. A significant source of that phosphorus is fertilizers used at an earlier celery farm located on two ponds along Bear Creek near where it enters Bear Lake.

Another historical agricultural modification was the installation of earthen berms between the celery farm ponds and Bear Creek that prevent water and fish passage between the wetlands and Bear Lake and Muskegon Lake. In 2013, funding from the NOAA Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program allowed Muskegon County to purchase the ponds in preparation for restoration work. The Muskegon Lake Watershed Partnership and several private property owners are also coordinating with project partners to support restoration of the site. Over the next three years the berms will be removed, 2,015 feet of stream bank will be restored, 148,608 tons of sediments will be removed from the celery ponds to decrease phosphorus contamination and 36.4 acres of wetlands will be restored.

###

The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Kelly Burch, executive director of oil and gas operations for the Pennsylvania Dept. of Environmental Protection, 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.