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Sustaining Great Lakes restoration and safeguarding drinking water top Great Lakes Commission federal priorities

Washington, D.C. – Protecting drinking water from toxic algae blooms and failing water infrastructure, and sustaining implementation of the Great Lakes restoration strategy, topped the agenda of issues decided at the Great Lakes Commission’s Semiannual Meeting, which concluded today in Washington, D.C.

Speaking at the start of the meeting, U.S. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy announced the formal adoption of a 40 percent target for reducing phosphorus loadings to the western and central basins of Lake Erie by 2025 under the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. “If we want to protect public health in the Great Lakes region, we need to protect Lake Erie. Why? Because it’s fundamental to the quality of life for millions of people and is an economic engine for the region,” Administrator McCarthy said. She noted that “this target is completely consistent with the great work that Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario have already been doing over the past two years to reduce phosphorus flowing into the western Lake Erie basin.” She emphasized that “what happens in Lake Erie is telling of what could happen in our other Great Lakes. So we need to pay attention, and we need to take action.”

The Commission’s meeting showcased several initiatives underway to reduce nutrient pollution to Lake Erie, including the 2015 Western Basin of Lake Erie Collaborative Agreement in which Ohio Governor Kasich, Michigan Governor Snyder and Ontario Premier Wynne committed to a 40 percent phosphorus reduction target by 2025 for western Lake Erie. The Commission’s Blue Accounting Source Water Initiative will support these efforts by establishing data collection and information management systems to track progress in reducing phosphorus loadings.

Great Lakes Commissioner and Ohio EPA Director Craig Butler welcomed the announcement from Administrator McCarthy, stating that “it is essential that we all work in unison toward a common goal and I am pleased that the United States and Canada are adopting the same aggressive approach that Ohio, Michigan and Ontario have committed to.” Butler noted that Ohio is increasing monitoring of nutrient runoff into the western basin of Lake Erie to better measure and target specific sources. “We’ve made tremendous progress in protecting Lake Erie, but there’s more work to be done to protect this resource that is so essential for the people of Ohio,” Butler added.

Administrator McCarthy also highlighted the challenge of failing water infrastructure and threats to drinking water from lead contamination and toxins from algae, stating that “incidents like the ones we’ve seen in Toledo,

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Great Lakes Commission

Jon W. Allan (MI), Chair; Tim A. Eder, Executive Director

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in Flint, and in Sebring have shined a light on a much broader national issue that can't be ignored. And that is: our water infrastructure in this country is aging, it's antiquated, and it's severely underfunded." She thanked the Great Lakes Commission for continuing to bring needed attention to the issue, adding "I can't stress this enough: clean drinking water is essential to every human being and every living thing on this earth. So we have to pay attention. And we have to act."

"Despite the progress we've made in cleaning up the Great Lakes, the contamination of drinking water in Flint, Michigan, and Toledo, Ohio, is a sobering reminder that our freshwater resources remain vulnerable," said Great Lakes Commission Chair Jon Allan, director of the Michigan Office of the Great Lakes. He added that "fixing our region's aging water infrastructure is one of our longstanding priorities, but we must act with urgency to find solutions to this complex and costly challenge, and ensure that we protect public health while we are getting the job done."

U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) addressed the Commission and emphasized the importance of Great Lakes restoration efforts to clean up degraded waterfront areas and help revitalize coastal communities. "I am proud to join the Great Lakes Commission to celebrate our Great Lakes and champion efforts to protect our clean water resources," said Senator Baldwin. "Our Great Lakes are treasures and they are a critical asset for our quality of life in Wisconsin, as well as for our long-term economic security. I am committed to continuing my work with the Great Lakes Commission to carry on the strong Wisconsin tradition of protecting our freshwater resources."

The meeting showcased the need for actions to prevent Asian carp from invading the Great Lakes, including doubling the commercial harvesting of carp in the Illinois River to reduce the population density, aggressively moving forward with plans to block carp at the Brandon Road lock and dam, and updating the Asian carp action plan with strengthened monitoring, management and emergency response protocols.

Speaking to his fellow commissioners from the eight Great Lakes states and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Québec, Allan emphasized that "more than ever before we see that the work we do is vital to the health of our region and the people who live there. We are making progress in cleaning up legacy pollution and helping communities revitalize waterfront areas, which we should celebrate and sustain. However, real threats remain, and we must be vigilant, committed and creative in finding solutions and working collaboratively to ensure the Great Lakes remain a natural treasure and economic asset." Recognizing the Great Lakes Commission's mission to help the Great Lakes states and provinces speak with a unified voice, Allan urged his colleagues to "continue to leverage the power of our common voice and shared priorities to make progress over the coming year."

The Commission's 2016 priorities for Congress and the Administration include sustaining progress under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative; passing comprehensive legislation to strengthen and accelerate Great Lakes conservation efforts; protecting the Great Lakes from Asian carp and other invasive species; helping communities upgrade aging water infrastructure and safeguard drinking water; ensuring Farm Bill conservation programs target watersheds contributing polluted runoff to the Great Lakes; maintaining the Great Lakes Navigation System; and managing information to support effective decisionmaking for the Great Lakes.

The Commission passed three resolutions, which included

- endorsing a suite of [federal priorities for 2016](#) and calling on Congress and the Administration to sustain progress in implementing the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative;
- urging the [2016 presidential candidates to recognize the Great Lakes as a national treasure](#) and a vital asset for the eight-state Great Lakes region and to address Great Lakes priorities in their platforms and – if elected – advance them in their administration; and

- Recognizing the importance of outreach and education programs to [prevent the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species](#) and committing the Commission to collaborating with federal, state, provincial and local partners to advance work in this area.

Commissioners take their 2016 priorities to Capitol Hill on Thursday, beginning with the annual breakfast reception for Members of Congress and their staff and followed by individual meetings with members of the Great Lakes Congressional Delegation.

The Great Lakes Commission federal priorities for 2016 are available at www.glc.org/policy/glc-legislative-priorities. State fact sheets are also available outlining Great Lakes restoration projects underway in each jurisdiction.

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The Great Lakes Commission, led by Chair Jon W. Allan, director of the Michigan Office of the Great Lakes, 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.