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Contact:

Tim Eder

734-604-7281 (cell)

734-971-9135 (office)

Great Lakes Commission pushes action on Lake Erie water quality issues

Buffalo, N.Y. – Committed to protecting Lake Erie and the sustainability of our region’s drinking water supplies, the Great Lakes Commission (GLC) has agreed to form a working group to spur action on developing and refining practices, programs and policies to achieve pollutant reduction targets and protect water quality.

The task team of state and provincial water management officials will look at the target of reducing by 40 percent the load of phosphorus entering Lake Erie. That target has been set by the State of Ohio Lake Erie Task Force report and a Lake Erie Ecosystem Priority report from the International Joint Commission. The next step is to examine and refine existing regulatory and non-regulatory programs and design new approaches, where necessary, to meet the load reduction targets.

The GLC will work together with federal agencies, municipal officials and landowners to explore market-based and other cost-effective incentive programs to complement regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to strengthen the overall management regime for improving water quality and safeguarding drinking water.

[The resolution noted](#) that voluntary programs have spent more than \$9 billion in recent years. “We need to make sure that those programs are sustainable and that they are targeted at the most effective practices on the highest priority watersheds,” said Commissioner Jim Zehringer, director of the Ohio Dept. of Natural Resources.

The actions come in response to a drinking water crisis in Toledo, Ohio, in August 2014, when more than 400,000 residents of southeast Michigan and northwest Ohio were advised to avoid drinking and cooking with water supplied by the City of Toledo after local and state laboratories detected unsafe levels of microcystin, a toxin produced by a bloom of algae in western Lake Erie near the city’s drinking water intake.

“When the sustainability of our safe drinking water is threatened, the matters of protecting water quality take on a new urgency,” said Kelly Burch, newly elected chairman of the GLC, and executive director of oil and gas operations for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. Jon Allan, director of the Office of the Great Lakes, Michigan Dept. of Environmental Quality, was elected vice chair of the GLC by his peers.

Allan echoed Burch’s concerns about water quality. “36 million U.S. and Canadian citizens depend on the Great Lakes for their drinking water,” Allan said. “What happened in Toledo underscores the challenges that confront municipalities across the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region. We need to enhance our ability to manage the Great Lakes to be able to supply clean, safe drinking water and to better detect and eliminate the sources of

(more)

Great Lakes Commission

Kelvin Burch (PA), Acting 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

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pollution and other factors contributing to algal blooms.”

More than 100 GLC members – including delegations from all 10 of the Great Lakes states and provinces – observers, and federal, state and nongovernmental partners gathered in Buffalo, N.Y., Sept. 29-30, for the Annual Meeting of the Great Lakes Commission. Rep. Brian Higgins (26th Dist.-NY) opened the meeting with a keynote address that focused on the significant resurgence of the Buffalo River and its waterfront.

In other actions, the GLC presented a draft report on oil transportation, which evaluates the potential benefits and risks surrounding the transport of crude oil in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region. [The GLC passed an action item](#) directing the staff to publicize and solicit input on the draft report, which is available at <https://www.glc.org/oiltransport/comments.php>. The deadline for submitting comments is Dec. 1, 2014.

The GLC passed three additional resolutions:

- **[Flexibility in the federal standard for navigation dredging projects in the Great Lakes basin:](#)**
The resolution encourages state and local governments to expand the demand for the beneficial use of dredged material to make such uses viable solutions and encourages the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to consider the benefits of reusing clean sediment.
- **[Blue Accounting: A collaborative re-engineering of Great Lakes information strategy and delivery:](#)**
The resolution directs the GLC to begin implementing recommendations from its recent report, *Great Lakes Blue Accounting: Empowering Decisions to Realize Regional Water Values*, called for by the Great Lakes governors and the premier of Ontario. It urges regional information providers to join the GLC in harmonizing the roles of data/information portals, openly share data, and begin a pilot Blue Accounting framework focused on municipal water services, including factors such as those that contributed to the Toledo water crisis.
- **[Support for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan II in fiscal years 2015-19:](#)** The resolution commends U.S. EPA and its federal partners for updating the GLRI Action Plan and urges its effective implementation; calls on federal agencies to carry out the updated Action Plan in close consultation with the Great Lakes states, the Great Lakes Congressional Delegation and other partners; and calls on Congress to continue funding the GLRI through Fiscal Year 2019.

The GLC will next convene Feb. 24-26, 2015, in Washington, D.C.

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*The **Great Lakes Commission** 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.*