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Aspects of new Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement take shape at Great Lakes Commission meeting

Washington, D.C. – The first details of a renegotiated Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement between the United States and Canada emerged this week in Washington at a meeting of the Great Lakes Commission. Cameron Davis, senior advisor for the Great Lakes at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), said that although the document has not been finalized, “We have an agreement in principle.”

Also unveiled at the meeting were the Commission’s FY 2013 federal legislative priorities which include preventing the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species, cleaning up contaminated sediments, controlling polluted runoff, restoring degraded wetlands, and conserving fish and wildlife resources.

First enacted in 1972 and last revised in 1987, the Water Quality Agreement represents the primary Great Lakes environmental protection policy for the U.S. and Canadian federal governments. According to Davis, the new pact is more “prevention oriented” and “allows us to be more futuristic.” While in the past, the agreement focused most prominently on toxic pollutants, he said, the new version features increased emphasis on habitat restoration, particularly wetlands; invasive species; and potential impacts of climate change on Great Lakes water quality.

Davis noted that the new Water Quality Agreement’s forward-looking orientation will be more effective in identifying and responding to emerging environmental threats to the Great Lakes. “Even before they became established in the Great Lakes, we knew that zebra mussels were likely coming, but we could not move fast enough. This new agreement will allow us to respond to such threats much more effectively.”

The Commission received a firsthand report on the 2012 Farm Bill from Chris Adamo, staff director for the Senate Agriculture Committee, chaired by Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow. Reauthorization of the Farm Bill with strong provisions for conservation programs such as those supporting control of soil erosion and agricultural runoff is another high priority for the Commission. GLC Chair James Tierney said: “The 2012 Farm Bill is not only important to maintaining and enhancing our agricultural

(more)

Great Lakes Commission

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productivity , but also to protecting the Great Lakes from one of the greatest threats to water quality: non-point source pollution.”

Also appearing before the Great Lakes Commission was EPA Assistant Administrator Nancy Stoner who provided an update on a new, more integrated approach to stormwater and waste water management. In addition to being more effective in dealing with overflows impacting Great Lakes water quality, the new approach is more cost effective. “In our current budget-constrained environment,” said Stoner, “the goal is to make every dollar go as far as possible.”

The Commission also heard updates on efforts to keep Asian carp out of the Great Lakes, including a recently released study by the Commission and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, outlining engineering approaches to separation of the Chicago Areas Waterway System of the Great Lakes from the Mississippi River where Asian carp have been migrating northward since the 1980s.

Acknowledging the substantial backlog of dredging in the Great Lakes that has impaired navigational access to many ports and harbors, the Commission moved to support development of new legislation to provide federal funding for harbor maintenance, particularly for low-use commercial and recreational harbor communities. John Goss, Asian carp director for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, presented the U.S. federal government’s strategic framework for Asian carp control in FY2012, which will be supported by a \$51 million budget commitment.

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by James Tierney, assistant commissioner for water resources at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 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.