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Great Lakes Commission renews call for federal ballast discharge standards and measures to control harmful algae blooms

Detroit, MI – Regulation of ballast water to prevent the introduction of invasive species and reduction of nutrients associated with algal blooms were among measures endorsed by the Great Lakes Commission at its annual meeting, which concluded today in Detroit.

The meeting kicked off a first-ever series of meetings in Detroit of several regional and federal organizations involved in Great Lakes environmental policy.

The Commission unanimously adopted a resolution renewing its call for a federal policy for ballast discharge, rather than the individual state standards that have emerged in recent years in the absence of federal guidance.

“A strong federal standard that is protective of the Great Lakes will be a major step forward in getting ballast treatment systems on the market and ultimately on vessels operating in the Great Lakes,” said Great Lakes Commission Chair James Tierney, assistant commissioner for water resources at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 5 Administrator Susan Hedman noted that even without a federal standard, measures to encourage research and development of ballast water treatment technologies are being taken, saying “Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funding has been used for development and performance testing.”

In the wake of a summer season that saw an increase in harmful algae blooms in the Great Lakes, particularly on Lake Erie, the Commission called for establishment of a regional phosphorus reduction task force to develop recommendations for the reduction of phosphorus and other nutrients contributing to algae blooms and hypoxic “dead zones” in the lakes.

Keynote speakers at the meeting included Michigan Lieutenant Governor Brian Calley who outlined Michigan Governor Rick Snyder’s efforts to build a second bridge over the Detroit River between Detroit and Windsor. The Canadian federal government has offered \$550 million to help cover Michigan’s share of the bridge’s cost. The existing, privately owned Ambassador Bridge currently handles some 8,000 trucks a day and is, according to Calley, “one of the two largest border crossings in the world.”

(more)

Great Lakes Commission

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A second bridge, termed the New International Trade Crossing (NITC), would create a more seamless freeway-to-freeway connection between the major arteries of I-75 in the United States and the 401 freeway in Canada, said Calley, thus allowing “the mutually beneficial trade relationship between our two countries to flourish.”

The Commission responded with a unanimous resolution urging the Michigan legislature to approve the NITC project.

Among reports presented at the GLC meeting was an update on a study underway by the Commission and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative on alternatives for the ecological separation of the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basins to prevent Asian carp and other invasive species from entering the lakes and to modernize the Chicago waterway system.

Support for the effort was voiced by Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow who said in a taped presentation, “We know we have an emergency on our hands, not only in Chicago but in other watersheds feeding the Great Lakes like the Wabash and Maumee rivers. There is no question we have to move forward with a permanent solution.”

In other actions, the Commission re-elected Tierney and Kari Bennett, commissioner of the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission, as chair and vice chair respectively, and established a new standing committee to focus on economic development.

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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.