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Great Lakes Restoration Initiative clears congressional conference committee

Great Lakes Commission calls for congressional and presidential approval

Ann Arbor, Mich. – One of the most ambitious environmental restoration efforts ever proposed for the Great Lakes appears imminent following the emergence from a House-Senate conference committee of legislation providing \$475 million for a comprehensive Great Lakes restoration and protection initiative.

“We call on the House and Senate to approve, and the President to sign into law, the conference committee report. Our region is well prepared and ready to get to work cleaning up polluted hot spots and restoring recreational opportunities that are vital to local economies,” said Great Lakes Commission Chairman Illinois Governor Pat Quinn.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) was proposed by President Barack Obama in his 2010 budget to focus on the most critical environmental concerns facing the Great Lakes, including invasive species, toxic sediments, nonpoint source pollutants and wildlife habitat loss. Following passage by the House at the \$475 million funding level sought by President Obama, the measure was approved by the Senate at \$400 million. A conference committee announced agreement yesterday on \$475 million to support the first year of the Initiative.

The legislation now goes back to both houses of Congress for final approval and then to the President to be signed into law.

“This is truly a watershed moment,” said Quinn. “By fully funding the Initiative in 2010, the congressional conference committee is reinforcing the broad regional support for Great Lakes cleanup and restoration as well as the national recognition of the Great Lakes as the country’s most valuable freshwater resource.”

Leadership from the Great Lakes governors led to creation of the blueprint for restoring the Great Lakes, the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes. Governors and state agency officials, mayors, tribes, industry and non-government organizations all came together to create the blueprint in 2005, which now will receive critical funding for implementation from Congress.

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Great Lakes Commission

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The Great Lakes Commission assisted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) in convening outreach meetings in July and August in all eight Great Lakes states. The meetings helped prepare the region for the upcoming call for proposals and provided input to the federal agencies on how the GLRI could best be implemented. The sessions involved more than 1,000 participants and generated some 250 written comments on such issues as the role of the states, how priorities will be established, and maximizing administrative efficiency and accountability.

“This is unquestionably a great accomplishment for all who worked hard to make it happen. But there is little time for self-congratulation,” said Commission Vice Chair Todd Ambs, administrator of the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources Division of Water. “Our region now assumes a responsibility to use these dollars wisely and ensure a maximum return on the federal investment.”

A Multi-Year Action Plan for the GLRI, prepared by the U.S. EPA, guides how the funding will be allocated and how progress will be monitored. According to the Action Plan, the Initiative “will use outcome-oriented performance goals and measures to target the most significant problems and track progress in addressing them.” While U.S. EPA will lead the overall effort, it will enter into agreements to transfer more than half of the funding to other federal agencies. The \$475 million budget includes some \$250 million to be awarded through grants and project agreements to states, cities, tribes and nongovernmental groups.

The initiative’s implementation will be guided by the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy, completed in 2005 by 16 federal agencies, the states, cities, regional organizations, environmental groups, and business and industry. The Collaboration enjoyed strong leadership from the region’s governors, who identified the core restoration priorities on which the strategy was based.

“We have the plan and now the resources. The talking phase is behind us,” said Great Lakes Commission Executive Director Tim Eder. “It’s time to put boots on the ground and get to work.”

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Illinois Gov. Patrick Quinn, 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.