

For immediate release

March 5, 2010

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Legislation would boost Great Lakes restoration efforts and elevate role of the Great Lakes states

Ann Arbor, Mich. – The Great Lakes Commission hailed legislation introduced today in Congress that formally authorizes the recently established Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and elevates the role of the eight Great Lakes states in guiding restoration efforts in partnership with the federal government.

The “Great Lakes Ecosystem Protection Act” also reauthorizes EPA’s Great Lakes National Program Office and the Great Lakes Legacy Act, a highly successful federal program established in 2002 that has removed nearly one million cubic yards of toxic sediments from the Great Lakes.

“We need to lock in the federal commitment to cleaning up the Great Lakes,” said Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, chair of the Great Lakes Commission. “Thanks to the leadership of the President and Congress, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is off to a strong start.”

The Commission noted that the legislation would help achieve the goals of the widely-endorsed Great Lakes restoration strategy and leverage leadership from the Great Lakes states.

The Senate bill – S. 3073 – was introduced by Senators Levin (D-MI), Voinovich (R-OH), Klobuchar (D-MN), Brown (D-OH), Franken (D-MN), Stabenow (D-MI) and Durbin (D-IL). The House bill – H.R. 4755 – was introduced by Representatives Dingell (D-MI), Ehlers (R-MI), Kirk (R-IL) and Slaughter (D-NY).

President Obama initiated the GLRI in 2009 and requested \$475 million for the program’s first year, which was subsequently approved by Congress. The EPA recently announced an action plan for the GLRI that commits \$2.2 billion to the program over its five-year lifespan, inclusive of the first year’s funding.

“This legislation recognizes the critical role of the Great Lakes states, cities and other partners in caring for the Great Lakes,” said Todd Ambs, administrator of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Division of Water and vice chair of the Great Lakes Commission. “It will provide the leadership we need to make the most of this unprecedented opportunity to restore this precious resource,” he added.

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Great Lakes Commission

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The legislation would establish a two-tiered advisory body to the EPA comprised of a “Great Lakes Leadership Council” with executives from federal agencies, states, tribes and local governments, and a “Great Lakes Management Council” with senior managers from these agencies as well as the Great Lakes Commission, the International Joint Commission and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, along with representation from the industrial, environmental, agricultural and academic community in the Great Lakes region.

The Leadership Council would establish annual goals for the GLRI, make budget recommendations and report to Congress on the Initiative’s progress. The Management Council would guide implementation of the restoration program and coordinate contributions from various federal, state and local agencies and nongovernmental partners. This structure ensures transparency and accountability while leveraging contributions from the states and other entities in the region.

The legislation advances one of the Great Lakes Commission’s top legislative priorities, which were formally presented to Congress during the recent Great Lakes Day in Washington. Other priorities being advanced by the Commission include maintaining funding for the GLRI, protecting water quality, and safeguarding the Great Lakes against damaging invasive species, such as Asian carp. The Commission’s complete legislative program can be accessed at the Commission’s website at www.glc.org/restore.

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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.