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New reports on nutrient loading and spill response released by Great Lakes Commission; Wisconsin's Kenneth G. Johnson elected chair

Cleveland, Ohio – Actions to reduce phosphorus loadings to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River system were the focus of the Annual Meeting of the Great Lakes Commission, which kicked off Great Lakes Week in Cleveland this week. A GLC-led Regional Phosphorus Reduction Task Force released a report with more than 50 recommendations believed to be necessary elements of a comprehensive, binational effort to achieve and sustain meaningful reductions in nutrient pollution to the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River.

Phosphorus loadings, primarily from nonpoint sources, are the cause of the widely reported harmful algal blooms which have been prevalent in western Lake Erie in recent years. According to Dr. Jeff Reutter, director of Ohio Sea Grant and Stone Laboratory, the biomass produced in Lake Erie in 2011 exceeded the previous highest biomass years combined. Erie is the southernmost, shallowest and warmest of the Great Lakes. Lake Erie is very susceptible to HABs due to its size and the large amount of agricultural lands in the surrounding area.

In other notable business, Kenneth G. Johnson, water division administrator at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, was elected new chair of the Commission. Mr. Johnson will serve along with new Vice Chair Kelly Burch, regional director of the Northwest Regional Office at the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. Johnson and Burch replace outgoing officers Jim Tierney, assistant commissioner for water resources at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and Kari Bennett, commissioner for the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission, who are concluding two-year terms.

“I am honored and delighted to serve as chairman of the Great Lakes Commission,” Johnson said. “I see dealing with phosphorus loadings and harmful algal blooms and solving the problem of aquatic invasive species as two of the most important challenges facing the Commission and the region, as a whole, and would like to contribute to solving these problems.”

Great Lakes Commission

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The GLC hosted a special joint session with the International Joint Commission to discuss actions to accelerate and target nutrient reduction efforts and achieve near-term results that will reduce the frequency and severity of harmful algal blooms and related water quality impacts in the Great Lakes. Dave Dempsey, special advisor to the IJC, presented the IJC's Lake Erie Ecosystem Priority (LEEP) to reduce phosphorus loads and algal blooms. LEEP plans to take the best science available to produce a series of review papers on various topics, including social/economic factors. A Lake Erie workshop will be held in February 2013 to review the draft reports. Recommendations to the governments are expected in fall 2013.

The GLC released a second task force report focused on improving emergency preparedness and response in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River system.

"The task force recommendations and the accompanying resolution adopted by the GLC will help ensure that the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River are well protected in the event of an oil or other hazardous material spill," said GLC Executive Director Tim Eder.

Pipelines, vessels, facilities and cold weather response were the primary categories that were examined. The report was requested by the Great Lakes states and provinces in response to two notable spills in the last decade: the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the largest in U.S. history, and, more recently, the Talmadge Creek (Kalamazoo River) spill near Marshall, Mich., one of the largest inland emergency response efforts in U.S. history.

In addition to acknowledging receipt of the two reports, the GLC passed resolutions pertaining to renewable and clean energy, the Great Ships Initiative, U.S.-Canada procurement policies, and extending the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative beyond 2014.

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Kenneth G. Johnson, water division administrator at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 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.