



# An Action Plan for Growing the Great Lakes Blue Economy

2021

## Growing the Great Lakes Blue Economy

The Great Lakes are a critical driver for the regional economy. They supply drinking water for communities, transport people and goods, and fuel the growth of major industries. The Great Lakes region has grown and prospered based in large measure on water and uses of water. In recent decades, regional leaders have increasingly recognized the potential for the basin's abundant water resources to bolster a new era of economic activity. A new vision is emerging for a Great Lakes Blue Economy that promotes economic growth by attracting and retaining talent, supporting new and existing water-dependent industries, and providing distinctive amenities to sustain a high quality of life.

## A Convening of Great Lakes Leaders

Leaders representing more than 50 Great Lakes agencies and organizations met in July 2019 to assess the current state of knowledge on the Great Lakes Blue Economy and recommend building blocks to accelerate and sustain its long-term growth. The workshop was convened by the Great Lakes Commission with several partner agencies and regional organizations. This Action Plan reflects the collective wisdom of those thought leaders.

## An Action Plan for the Great Lakes Blue Economy

The Action Plan recommends specific building blocks for sustaining and growing the Great Lakes Blue Economy. It is intended both as a roadmap for collective action and a challenge to regional leaders to *take strategic action* to leverage the economic potential of the Great Lakes and our abundant freshwater resources. The Action Plan is intended to encourage the region's many agencies and organizations to assume leadership for and support this work. Carefully assembled in a sustained and coordinated manner, these building blocks can form the foundation for a flourishing Great Lakes Blue Economy.

## Foundations for the Great Lakes Blue Economy

Regional leaders identified the following priorities as a critical foundation for growing and sustaining the Great Lakes Blue Economy. These reflect larger challenges facing our region that transcend more specific water-related economic opportunities. A variety of programs and institutions are already in place to address these challenges. However, the Action Plan underscores these priorities as the foundation for the Great Lakes Blue Economy and urges continued investments and collective action to address them.

- Restore and maintain water quality and the overall environmental health of the Great Lakes.
- Ensure the sustainable use of Great Lakes water resources, including adequate water quantity for various uses while maintaining ecosystem health.
- Modernize and maintain Great Lakes basin infrastructure and ensure it is resilient to changing climate conditions.
- Promote, strengthen and enable community-based leadership and capacity to take action to protect water quality, revitalize waterfront areas, and grow resilient, place-based Blue Economy activities.
- Strengthen public appreciation for the Great Lakes and freshwater resources and the threats facing them through public education and outreach programs, K-12 STEM education, and other activities to increase Great Lakes literacy and stewardship.
- Attract and retain the best workforce talent, strengthen the quality of the talent pipeline, grow the population, and spur business and job creation in the Great Lakes region.
- Provide equitable and affordable public access to water resources and coastal amenities, help historically disadvantaged communities impacted by degraded environmental conditions, and ensure that the Blue Economy benefits all residents.
- Expand private and public investments to address current and emerging social, ecological, and economic challenges in the region.

## Building Blocks for Growing the Great Lakes Blue Economy

### Regional Vision and Collective Action

A cohesive regional vision and structure for collective action are critical to effectively coordinate the policies, investments, research and communications needed to grow the Great Lakes Blue Economy. Great Lakes leaders must look beyond their jurisdictional and organizational boundaries and focus on the *regional* Great Lakes Blue Economy and potential regionwide benefits.

#### Building Blocks

- Leverage the capabilities of trusted institutions to convene regional leaders to advance the Great Lakes Blue Economy. Identify the organizational arrangements to lead Blue Economy efforts at the regional level, including an entity to serve as a “hub” or backbone organization to support a collective impact effort. Broaden engagement and ensure stakeholders that reflect the full Great

Lakes basin are at the table (e.g., business, finance, research, etc.), possibly through the creation of a “Blue Economy Council” or similar forum.

- Establish a compelling collective vision for the Great Lakes basin and the Great Lakes Blue Economy.
- Promote effective collaboration, consensus-building and decision-making across jurisdictions to harmonize policies, programs and investments and avoid fractured decision-making.
- Actively engage the business and industry sector to support sustainable practices, protect and enhance the Blue Economy, sustain job growth and technological innovation, and collaborate with regional leaders.
- Support existing and develop new financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships and financial products, to support investments in water and other infrastructure, innovative technologies and services, and other needs.
- Institutionalize a structure and process for convening regional leaders and key stakeholders on the Great Lakes Blue Economy (such as an annual Great Lakes Blue Economy Conference).

## **Regional Leadership in Water Technology, Innovation and Education**

The Great Lakes region is well positioned to strategically develop its water research, education, technology and innovation sector. The region is home to leading research institutions that generate exceptional water-related science, engineering and environmental expertise. Many prominent water technology firms are based in the region and several cities have embraced water technology “clusters” as an economic development strategy. With this foundation, the Great Lakes region has a unique advantage to compete for the growing demand for new water products, services and technologies.

### **Building Blocks**

- Strengthen collaboration among colleges and universities to develop tomorrow’s water leaders and maintain regional leadership in water technology expertise.
- Improve collaboration between the private sector, public sector, and research and development programs to promote the commercialization and deployment of new water-related technologies. Support university-based business engagement centers, water technology incubator and accelerator initiatives, and related efforts.
- Invest in, develop and deploy new technologies to support innovations in water infrastructure.
- Promote a regional consensus on water-related research priorities based on needs and opportunities for commercial applications.
- Attract and retain water-related talent by promoting educational and employment opportunities (at multiple levels) and showcasing lifestyle amenities associated with the Great Lakes and freshwater.

## Market and Showcase the Great Lakes Region and its Freshwater Assets

The Great Lakes are the region’s iconic natural feature. They are to the Great Lakes states and provinces what the Pacific Ocean and the Rocky Mountains are to California and Colorado. Fresh water surrounds the region and is imbedded in its culture and lifestyle. In an increasingly water-stressed world, the Great Lakes’ ample supply of fresh water is an invaluable asset for attracting people and businesses. Building on these defining attributes, regional leaders should establish a unique Great Lakes brand and strategically market the Great Lakes Blue Economy at the national and international levels.

### Building Blocks

- Brand the Great Lakes Blue Economy to promote tourism and business investment and attract workforce talent. Emphasize the Great Lakes as our region’s unique, defining characteristic and define the “experiences” that they provide.
- Establish a unified, regional identity and branding — at the national, binational and international levels — for the Great Lakes centered on opportunities in the Blue Economy.
- Leverage the outdoor recreation industry to promote tourism and the unique identity of the Great Lakes region associated with water-related recreation.
- Attract talent to support the Great Lakes Blue Economy, particularly young people to counteract the demographic challenge of an aging population.

## Science, Data and Information, and Economic Research to Inform Decision-Making

Regional leaders need better data, information and research to understand the Great Lakes Blue Economy and make smart decisions on how to grow it. While the region has a strong and well-connected scientific community focused on the Great Lakes, far less coordination and collaboration exist on the water-related economy. Significant economic and business expertise exists in the region, but it is generally not focused on understanding the contemporary Great Lakes Blue Economy, and the relevant data is not well collected, synthesized or disseminated.

### Building Blocks

- Utilize the Great Lakes Commission’s Blue Accounting to establish shared goals for the Great Lakes Blue Economy, use shared metrics to track progress toward those goals, and establish an ongoing process for identifying opportunities for growing the Blue Economy. This should be guided by a working group of regional leaders and supported by a shared data hub that may also help guide other regional efforts on the Blue Economy.
- Improve the collection, analysis and dissemination of economic data on the Great Lakes Blue Economy. For example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) developed the Marine Economy Satellite Account in partnership with the Bureau of Economic Analysis to measure and report on economic activity related to the oceans and Great Lakes, which generated national estimates for 2014–2019. The Great Lakes should be a specific regional focus area for

future estimates, including those provided through the Economics: National Ocean Watch (ENOW) database, along with tools to facilitate use of the resulting data. Such an effort should closely engage regional leaders, economists, and the business community to respond to regional definitions and priorities, and enhance information sharing and accessibility within a comprehensive data hub that supports policy development and decision-making on the Great Lakes Blue Economy. Establish a network of Great Lakes economists to frame an economic research program on the Great Lakes Blue Economy, including business development, economic drivers for waterfront revitalization, demographic and employment trends, and related issues.

- Facilitate the exchange of research results and economic policy and management priorities among economists, elected officials, state and local economic development agencies, and business leaders. Identify or provide a forum for the exchange of policies, best management practices, and opportunities to apply economic research on the Great Lakes Blue Economy. Create an interface between academic economists and policymakers, business leaders, and others involved in Blue Economy efforts.
- Universities, public agencies and foundations should support and encourage coordinated research on the Great Lakes Blue Economy, including funding for Great Lakes research, centers of excellence, professional development and related activities. This should be directed at developing a robust and well-connected research community focused on the Great Lakes Blue Economy as well as collaboration with other regions and countries.

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This Action Plan is the result of a July 2019 workshop with a diverse cross section of Great Lakes leaders. The workshop discussions were informed by a framing paper on the Great Lakes Blue Economy, followed by a detailed workshop summary report. This effort grew out of a previous study entitled *Assessing the Investment: The Economic Impact of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative*. Materials from these initiatives are available on the Great Lakes Commission's website at <http://bit.ly/GLRIEconomicImpact>.

This work was guided by a team including the Great Lakes Commission, the Council of Great Lakes Industries, the Alliance for the Great Lakes, the National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes Regional Center, the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy's Office of the Great Lakes, and the University of Michigan's Water Center.

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