Great Lakes Commission
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RESOLUTION

Adopted October 30, 2025

Coordinated Monitoring, Assessment, Management, and Prevention of Plastic Pollution in the Great Lakes Basin

Whereas, the waters of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River provide a multitude of ecological, social, and economic benefits for approximately 40 million U.S. and Canadian residents; and

Whereas, plastics are widespread throughout the Great Lakes and St Lawrence region and have been found in water, air, soil, and biota including mussels, birds, fish, and algae and enter the environment from diverse pathways; and

Whereas, plastic pollution has become one of the most pressing environmental problems in the U.S., Canada, and globally; and

Whereas, plastic pollution is the accumulation of synthetic polymer products ranging from large debris to microplastics and even smaller fragments that do not readily degrade in the environment; and

Whereas, microplastics come from a variety of sources including the breakdown of larger plastics (e.g., plastic bottles/bags, rope, nets, or other debris) into smaller plastics, release during plastic manufacturing (e.g., nurdles, microbeads, or plastic containing wastewater), and release during the use of plastic products (e.g., synthetic clothing and vehicle tires); and,

Whereas, studies and data vary greatly regarding the extent of the plastic problem and some researchers estimate that nearly 10,000 metric tons—or 22 million pounds—of plastic debris may be entering the Great Lakes every year from the U.S. and Canada;[1] and

Whereas, emerging scientific evidence suggests that impacts from plastic pollution including microplastics, chemical additives, and contaminants absorbed by plastic particles may affect human health and organisms; and,

Whereas, more research is needed to investigate plastic pollution throughout the environment and potential links to understand human and environmental health effects; and,

Whereas, there is growing public awareness of the increasing presence of plastics and microplastics in the human body and the environment; and

[1] Matthew J. Hoffman, Eric Hittinger. Inventory and transport of plastic debris in the Laurentian Great Lakes. Marine Pollution Bulletin. Volume 115, Issues 1–2. 2017. Pages 273-281. ISSN 0025-326X. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0025326X1630981X

Whereas, the scope, scale, and complexity of plastic pollution necessitate coordinated action across all levels of government; and

Whereas, successfully combatting plastic pollution requires the Great Lakes States, Canadian provinces, and federal and provincial governments to adopt a comprehensive approach addressing the full lifecycle of all plastics, whether in consumer packaging or in products, from extraction to end of life; and

Whereas, the Final Report of the International Joint Commission (IJC) Great Lakes Science Advisory Board Work Group on Microplastics, published in November 2024,[2] provides comprehensive recommendations to synthesize current scientific understanding of microplastics, establish a harmonized, basin-wide monitoring and reporting framework, and advance coordinated risk assessment and management approaches focused on the ecological effects of microplastic pollution in the Great Lakes; and

Whereas, standardization, transparency across the supply chain, and innovation in materials and services can help ensure product compatibility with waste systems and minimize impacts on human health and the environment; and

Whereas, while broad sampling for plastics and microplastics has been conducted in the Great Lakes, significant data gaps remain regarding spatial and temporal variability in pathways, sources, and effective mitigation strategies; and

Whereas, existing data has been collected using inconsistent methodologies due to the absence of a basin-wide, coordinated monitoring program for plastics and microplastics in the region.

Therefore, Be It Resolved, the Great Lakes Commission encourages the eight Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces to continue proactively implementing measures to further prevent plastics from entering the Great Lakes through a combination of science and research, policy innovation, market-based instruments, and education and outreach; and

Therefore, Be It Further Resolved, that the Great Lakes Commission recognizes the importance of a coordinated, basin-wide approach to reducing plastic pollution in the Great Lakes, including monitoring, assessment, management, prevention, and remediation; and

Therefore, Be It Further Resolved, that the Great Lakes Commission will establish an ad hoc committee on plastic pollution, including commissioners (or their designees) from each GLC jurisdiction; and

Therefore, Be It Further Resolved, that the Great Lakes Commission ad hoc committee on plastic pollution will evaluate opportunities including but not limited to: monitoring, research, and risk assessment; source reduction, regulation, and product stewardship; waste management, remediation, and best practices; public education, engagement, and partnerships; funding and implementation support; and

Therefore, Be It Further Resolved, the Great Lakes Commission ad hoc committee on plastic pollution will develop an Action Plan to address plastic pollution in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River; and

Be It Finally Resolved, the Great Lakes Commission calls for the member states and provinces to bolster intra- and interstate collaboration and partnership to implement the Action Plan to address plastic pollution.

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[2] Kidd, K., Rooney, R., Rochman, C., Hataley, E. (2024) Final Report of the IJC Great Lakes Science Advisory Board Work Group on Microplastics. Monitoring, Ecological Risk Assessment, and Management of Microplastics in the Laurentian Great Lakes. https://ijc.org/sites/default/files/SAB_MicroplasticsReport_2024.pdf

Adopted at the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Great Lakes Commission, October 29-30, 2025, held in Duluth, Minnesota. The resolution was passed unanimously.