



Healing Our Waters[®]-Great Lakes Coalition

March 28, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we ask you to designate the Great Lakes as a critical conservation area under the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program authorized by the new Farm Bill.

The Great Lakes are cleaner today because of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) voluntary, incentives-based conservation programs. A 2011 study by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) found that conservation tillage and other conservation practices have resulted in a 50 percent decline in sediment entering rivers and streams that flow into the Great Lakes. It also found 36 and 37 percent declines, respectively, in phosphorus and nitrogen loading.

However, urban and agricultural runoff continues to contribute to the problems facing the Great Lakes. Experts say new algal blooms are being fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from farms, urban areas, and municipal sewage treatment facilities. Stronger storms driven by climate change and invasive mussels also contribute to the problem. One only need to look at satellite images to see the enormous impact this is having on the Great Lakes environment and economy as these blooms close beaches, kill fish, impact local drinking water supplies, and harm small, local businesses like charter boats. The green algal blooms are spreading farther and faster and beginning earlier than ever before.

While agriculture contributes to the problem, farmers are contributing to the solution by undertaking conservation on their lands that keeps nutrients out of Great Lakes rivers and streams. As our Coalition's report¹ illustrated in 2012, farmers across the region are embracing conservation practices that yield long-term results. However, our report also demonstrated that more must be done. The new Regional Conservation Partnership Program adds to the tools our region will have to tackle issues with polluted runoff.

This new program would select conservation projects through a competitive, merit-based process that would improve soil quality, water quality or quantity, or wildlife habitat in regions such as the Great Lakes. It sets aside conservation funding to encourage innovative partnerships between watershed groups and farmers to work together to further the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife, and other natural resources on a regional or watershed scale. It also provides for accountability by linking the projects to local efforts or other regional initiatives (like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative).

This administration has made protecting and restoring the Great Lakes a national priority and USDA has been an important and effective partner in helping the region address excess phosphorus,

¹ At <http://healthylakes.org/news-events/press-release/new-report-strong-farm-bill-key-to-great-lakes-restoration/>

which USDA acknowledges contributes to harmful algal blooms in the Great Lakes. The GLRI is investing in solutions to tackle this serious problem. USDA, through the NRCS, is focusing extra GLRI-supported assistance in 55 priority watersheds where voluntary efforts by farmers can have the biggest impact. The GLRI is spurring new partnerships and coordination between governments, non-governmental organizations, landowners, farmers, and businesses. Making the Great Lakes a critical conservation area enhances this work and leverages both the investments and the partnerships already established to reduce phosphorus runoff and harmful algal blooms in the Great Lakes.

Please designate the Great Lakes as a critical conservation area under the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The extra support will help conserve soil and water thereby protecting the drinking water source for millions of people, keeping beaches open and charter boats full, restoring habitat for fish and wildlife, and helping to address one of the biggest problems facing the Great Lakes today. For more information about our Coalition or if you have questions about our request, please contact Chad Lord, our coalition's policy director, at (202) 454-3385 or clord@npca.org.

Sincerely,

Joel Brammeier
President & CEO
Alliance for the Great Lakes

David Brakhage
Director, Great Lakes/Atlantic Region
Ducks Unlimited

Katie Rousseau
Director, Clean Water Supply – Great Lakes
American Rivers

Tracey Easthope
Director, Environmental Health Project
Ecology Center

Mary Smith
Communications Coordinator
Church Women United of New York State

Suzanne Moynihan
Director
The EDGE: Education Dreams for a Green Era

Brian Smith
Program & Communications Director
Citizens Campaign for the Environment

Jill Ryan
Executive Director
Freshwater Future

Deanna White
State Director
Clean Water Action – Minnesota

Mike Strigel
Executive Director
Gathering Waters Conservancy

Mark Redsten
Executive Director
Clean Wisconsin

Sr. Rose Therese Nolta
Justice and Peace Coordinator
Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters

Anne M. Vaara
Executive Director
Clinton River Watershed Council

Kim E. Ferraro
Director of Agricultural and Water Policy
Hoosier Environmental Council

Amy Beyer
Director
Conservation Resource Alliance

Laura Rubin
Executive Director
Huron River Watershed Council

Jill Crafton
Chair - Great Lakes Committee
Izaak Walton League of America

Ray Stewart
President
Ohio Wetlands Association

Gary Wager
Executive Director
Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition

Kristina Patterson
Executive Director
Partners For Clean Streams, Inc.

Sandy Bihn
Executive Director
Lake Erie Waterkeeper Inc.

Irene Senn
Coordinator
Religious Coalition for the Great Lakes

Brian Price
Executive Director
Leelanau Conservancy

Denny Caneff
Executive Director
River Alliance of Wisconsin

Lisa Wozniak
Executive Director
Michigan League of Conservation Voters

Nicole Barker
Executive Director
Save the Dunes

Cheryl Nenn
Riverkeeper
Milwaukee Riverkeeper

Lee Willbanks
Upper St. Lawrence Riverkeeper
Executive Director
Save The River

Steve Morse
Executive Director
Minnesota Environmental Partnership

Sister Phyllis Tierney
SSJ Global Environment Committee
Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester

Lynn McClure
Midwest Regional Office Director
National Parks Conservation Association

Lisa Brush
Executive Director
Stewardship Network

Marc Smith
Policy Director
National Wildlife Federation

Jennifer McKay
Policy Specialist
Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

Melinda Hughes-Wert
President
Nature Abounds

Dendra J. Best
Executive Director
Wastewater Education

Dennis West
President
Northern Initiatives

Ellen Satterlee
CEO
The Wege Foundation

Kristy Meyer
Managing Director, Agricultural, Health &
Clean Water Programs
Ohio Environmental Council

Rich Cochran
President and CEO
Western Reserve Land Conservancy