



Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition

March 22, 2018

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128 U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-146A U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran and Ranking Member Leahy:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we write to ask that you assure the Fiscal Year 2019 appropriations bills provide funding for Great Lakes restoration priorities. We are grateful for the much-needed support the region has received. We are seeing on-the-ground results because of these investments in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. However, the Great Lakes still face many urgent problems, which is why we are concerned with the President's proposed budget. The problems we face will only get worse and the price we pay will be much higher if the federal partnership with the region is scaled back.

First, we ask you to support \$300 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). Restoration efforts are improving the lives of millions of people and work is underway or completed on nearly 4,000 restoration projects throughout the region. These projects are benefiting communities by cleaning up streams that provide drinking water for millions of homes and thousands of industries. Restoration work is improving infrastructure important for future economic growth in the eight-state region. These projects are delivering results, including:

- Three Areas of Concern – Presque Isle, Pa.; Deer Lake, Mich.; and White Lake, Mich. – have been delisted since the GLRI began. The management actions necessary to delist four additional AOCs have also been completed. In the previous two decades before the GLRI, only one AOC had been cleaned up. Work is ready in 19 more AOCs with \$106 million available in non-federal matching funds.
- Fifty beneficial use impairments (BUIs) at 18 AOCs were addressed in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin under the GLRI, more than quintupling the total number of BUIs removed in the preceding 22 years. More BUIs have been removed under the GLRI than between 1987 and 2009.
- Combined with other funding, farmers implemented conservation action on more than one million acres of rural lands in order to reduce erosion and farm runoff that feeds algal blooms. This supplemental funding helped double farmland under conservation in Western Lake Erie, Saginaw Bay, and Green Bay.

- More than 513 dams and barriers were removed allowing fish to access more than 4,600 miles of river.

Second, we urge you to at least double the funding for both the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund to \$2.8 billion and \$1.7 billion respectively. The region's water infrastructure needs to be repaired or replaced. EPA estimates that \$77 billion is needed in the Great Lakes region alone to replace old sewer pipes and wastewater plants. Over \$102 billion is needed to fix drinking water problems that threaten the public's safety over the next 20 years. The problem in urban water systems and in economically disadvantaged communities is particularly acute. Sewer overflows pour millions of gallons of raw sewage into the Great Lakes and lead drinking water pipes threaten the health of communities. The Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) are two key sources of funds to solve these problems. Communities depend on them for financing to implement costly, but critical, wastewater and drinking water infrastructure projects.

Third, the threat of aquatic invasive species, like Asian carp, is real and persistent in our region. To keep Asian carp out of the Great Lakes we ask Congress to fully fund all actions taken as part of the FY2017 Asian Carp Action Plan, adjusted to reflect the Asian carp threat and agency need. For example, we support the \$18.9 million requested for the U.S. Army Corps to operate and maintain the electric barrier. We also support \$10.4 million for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (equal to this year's proposed funding) and funding for the critical Asian carp research being undertaken by the U.S. Geological Survey on monitoring and eliminating bighead, silver, and grass carp. In addition, we ask the committee to include language that requires the Army Corps of Engineers to move to pre-construction engineering and design for new structural measures at the Brandon Road lock and dam. The Army Corps is expected to complete its Brandon Road feasibility study next year. There cannot be any delay between the completion of that study and the development of necessary engineering plans to build new control measures to keep our region on track for building the next line of defense against Asian carp.

Fourth, urban and agricultural runoff continues to contribute to the problems facing the Great Lakes. Experts say harmful new algal blooms are fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from farms and urban areas. Stronger storms driven by climate change contribute to the problem, as do invasive mussels. New harmful algal blooms close beaches, kill fish, impact local drinking water supplies (like Toledo, Ohio, in 2014), and when water supplies are contaminated, the most vulnerable members of the community are the first to be impacted. Toxic algae also harms small, local businesses like charter boats. Harmful algal blooms are spreading farther and faster and beginning earlier than ever before and we must take action to protect communities from this growing threat.

To help the region respond to these algal blooms, we ask you to maintain full funding for the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Farm Bill conservation programs, like the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. This program is well placed to fund targeted, discrete conservation practices that will improve soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat in regions such as the Great Lakes. It sets aside conservation funding to encourage innovative partnerships between watershed groups and farmers. As partners, these organizations and farmers work together to further the conservation and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife habitat, 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).

Support for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program will not be enough to reduce algae-feeding phosphorus in the region's waterways. If we are to achieve 40 percent nutrient reductions in Western Lake Erie (as agreed to by the region's governors and the U.S. and Canadian governments) we will need a much more coordinated response. We ask that Congress provide all Farm Bill conservation programs with funding at authorized levels.

Lastly, our region will fall short of our restoration goals if the federal agencies that are vital partners in our restoration efforts have their budgets cut. U.S. EPA, the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Army Corps of Engineers, Coast Guard, National Park Service, and NRCS all provide critical administrative and programmatic support that helps us ensure the success of both the GLRI and other restoration activities in the region. These departments and agencies are critical partners with Great Lakes states, cities, industries, Tribes, and non-governmental organizations. Cutting EPA, Farm Bill conservation programs, and the Department of the Interior as proposed by the administration is unacceptable. For example, eliminating or cutting categorical Sec. 319 and 106 grants respectively from EPA to states eliminates hundreds of federally-funded positions in state agencies that have the delegated responsibility to enforce critical laws like the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act. Also, eliminating funding for programs like Sea Grant only harms the health and resilience of our coastal communities and makes it extremely difficult to make progress on critical clean-up efforts in places like western Lake Erie where Ohio Sea Grant serves as a key part of the work to reduce harmful algal blooms. We ask you to reject these massive cuts to non-defense discretionary spending.

Investments in Great Lakes restoration create short-term jobs and lead to long-term economic benefits for the Great Lakes states and the country. A Brookings Institution report shows that every \$1 invested in Great Lakes restoration generates at least \$2 in return, making Great Lakes restoration one of the best investments in the federal budget. More recent research from Grand Valley State University suggests that the return on investment for certain projects may be closer to 6-to-1. The University of Michigan has also demonstrated that over 1.5 million jobs are dependent on clean and healthy Great Lakes, accounting for more than \$60 billion in wages annually. We have also seen jobs being created by our nation's efforts to clean up the Great Lakes and restore fish and wildlife habitat. These jobs include wetland scientists, electricians, engineers, landscape architects, plumbers, truck drivers and many others.

However, there is still much work that needs to be done. Aging sewers, invasive species, and toxic pollutants are just a few of the pervasive threats that impact the region, endangering human and wildlife health, lowering property values, and hurting the region's economy. Cutting funding will slow restoration efforts, allowing problems to get worse and making them more expensive to solve. Ultimately, cutting spending on the Great Lakes won't save money—it will cost the nation more. As the source of drinking water for 30 million people, the nation cannot afford to stop protecting and restoring the Great Lakes.

Now is not the time to scale back our nation's commitment to restore the Great Lakes environment and economy. Progress is being made and we are seeing results. For the economy and the environment, please make sure that the fiscal year 2019 appropriations bills provide at least \$300 million for the GLRI; water infrastructure funding is at least doubled for the Clean Water SRF and the Drinking Water SRF; the Asian carp action plan is fully funded; there are resources for the RCPP and all Farm Bill conservation programs at authorized levels; and the cuts to non-defense discretionary programs are rejected.

If you have questions regarding this request, please do not hesitate to have your staff contact our coalition's policy director, Chad Lord, at 202-454-3385 or clord@npca.org.

Sincerely,

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The Honorable Lamar Alexander
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