



Great Lakes and Drinking Water Message Guide



December 2019

This message guide builds on findings of the 2019 Great Lakes Survey and offers recommendations for communicating on the Healing Our Waters Great Lakes platform.

The survey was conducted by Belden Russonello Strategists and Emma White Research on behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition among 1,740 adult residents of the Great Lakes region, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Western Pennsylvania, and New York state outside of the New York Metropolitan Area. Interviews were conducted between October 4 and October 21, 2019, via Ipsos USA's KnowledgePanel, a representative online panel recruited from a random address-based sample of U.S. adults.

Communications Recommendations

1. Always make the connection to drinking water as a basic need.

The importance of clean water as a need for survival is extremely powerful. You can link any Great Lakes issue to drinking water by describing the Lakes as the source of drinking water for 30 million people, and/or you can make more specific links such as the threat posed by toxic algae. Using language about human rights can enhance this message among some groups, particularly African Americans, but will harm the effectiveness of your message if communicating with more conservative audiences.

2. Highlight problems that increase urgency.

Examples that tested well in the survey include sewage overflows (billions of gallons of raw sewage), the drinking water threats presented by toxic algae, and the threats algae poses to recreation and pets. Although we did not test a message about PFAS, we found that awareness of the issue is linked to greater support for the platform; efforts to raise awareness here will also likely be useful.

3. Flint is important, but don't make it *just* Flint.

Flint is an important example for the region of the potential harm of not taking drinking water problems seriously. At the same time, the most powerful message *against* spending on infrastructure puts the blame on government mismanagement of the Flint crisis as a reason not to spend federal dollars. Ensure that your communications on water are clear that drinking water across the region is threatened, not just in one location.

4. Instead of defending why we need "new regulations," insist that farmers defend why they should be allowed to pollute our drinking water.

As we saw in the focus groups last year and we see again in this survey, when you make clear for the public that excess fertilizer and animal waste from farms travel into local waterways and ultimately the Great Lakes, causing toxic algae blooms, they express a high

level of urgency for addressing the problem. There is no need to do more explaining than this, but a simple statement of the impacts of farming is necessary because of the public's low awareness of the issue. Emphasizing that much of the problem is large agribusiness will be helpful as well, as there is much less sympathy for this group than for small family farms.

5. Enlist local messengers.

Local scientists, water organizations, and impacted families are the most persuasive messengers on Great Lakes and drinking water issues. Put them front and center as much as you can. For the general public, messengers such as small businesses and religious leaders are seen as having less connection to the issue and will be less persuasive.

Suggested message language

Values framework: *Clean water is a basic need and we should do what it takes to ensure it is available to everyone in the region.*

Problem: *But our Great Lakes – and the 30 million people who depend on them for drinking water – are facing many threats. INSERT EXAMPLES SUCH AS:*

- *Billions of gallons of raw sewage flow into rivers and the Great Lakes every year, closing beaches and threatening our health.*
- *Toxic algae blooms are polluting our lakes and threatening drinking water.*
- *It's not just Flint, Michigan – communities across the region are dealing with lead contamination in our drinking water.*

Solution: *We need to address these problems now because the longer we wait the harder and more expensive it will be to solve. INSERT DESIRED POLICY OUTCOMES, SUCH AS:*

- *We must upgrade our outdated drinking water and sewage treatment infrastructure.*
- *This is a time to strengthen, not roll back, protections for our rivers, lakes, streams, and wetlands.*
- *We should create and enforce clear standards to control fertilizer and animal waste and prevent farms from polluting our water and causing toxic algae blooms that threaten drinking water.*

Answering the opposition

In general, messages opposing efforts to protect the Great Lakes and ensure drinking water are not as effective as messages in favor of these popular actions. We have strong answers to the potential attacks you may face on various elements of the Great Lakes platform, but do not let answering these attacks become a distraction from communicating your core messages.

Attack 1: We can't afford to do this; the cost is too high.

Response: We can't afford to leave residents without clean drinking water. And the longer we wait, the harder and more expensive these problems will be to solve.

Attack 2: The problem is government mismanagement; we can't trust government to do it right.

Response: We must hold government accountable for meeting our basic need of access to clean drinking water. We cannot let them off the hook now because of past failures – that's even more reason to insist they do it right.

Attack 3: We don't need more regulation; we have too much burdensome regulation already.

Response: With so many communities in the Midwest and around the country suffering from poor quality drinking water, now is the time to strengthen, not roll back, clean water protections for our lakes, rivers, streams, and drinking water.

Attack 4: Regulations on farm runoff will hurt the livelihood of small farmers.

Response: The real opposition to this is coming from large agribusinesses that cause most of the pollution, not small farmers. Clean drinking water is everyone's responsibility and the rules should apply to everybody, including farmers. We need to enforce clear standards to control the excess fertilizer and animal waste causing toxic algae blooms in our lakes and even the Great Lakes.

Attack 5: We have already spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the Great Lakes. Why should we keep spending more?

Response: *The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has made real progress in addressing some of the problems facing the Lakes (INSERT LOCAL EXAMPLE). But there is still much work to be done, and there are threats that restoration funding does not address. (INSERT PROBLEM EXAMPLE. RETURN TO MAIN MESSAGE).*

Communications dos and don'ts

- ✓ **Do** make the connection to drinking water wherever possible.
- ✓ **Do** describe clean water as a basic need we all require to be healthy.
- ✓ **Do** make the message inclusive by emphasizing that we all need clean drinking water, before focusing on disproportionate impacts on communities of color and low-income communities.
- ✓ **Do** cite specific examples of threats to drinking water, local to your state wherever possible.
- ✓ **Do** point out that if we wait to act, the problems will only get harder and more expensive.
- ✓ **Do** explain the connection between farm run-off and algae blooms in simple terms.
- ✓ **Do** reference Flint as an example of what can happen elsewhere when we neglect our infrastructure.
- ✓ **Do** mention big polluters such as agribusiness.
- ✓ **Do** enlist local messengers seen as having expertise.
- × **Do not** rely on climate change or the cost of water as rationales for action.
- × **Do not** emphasize human rights if communicating with a more conservative audience.
- × **Do not** be afraid to challenge farmers to stop polluting our streams and lakes, as long as you make clear that drinking water is at stake.
- × **Do not** rely on Flint alone without other examples as well.