



March 2, 2020

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Chairman
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
SD-142
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
SH-125
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Shaheen:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we write to ask that you assure the Fiscal Year 2021 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies appropriations bill provides 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 the 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 Great Lakes science and restoration by fully funding critical National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) programs. NOAA is an important federal partner to the region and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), conducting research and leading efforts such as harmful algal bloom forecasting, marine debris monitoring, and habitat restoration. Its leadership and partnership is essential, without which our restoration efforts would fall short of our region's needs and goals.

These critical programs include the Great Lakes Environmental Research Lab, operated by NOAA. The lab conducts innovative research on the dynamic environments and ecosystems of the region's water system that is critical in informing the restoration and management of safe and sustainable ecosystems, ecosystem services, and communities. Its investigations have included analyses of the food web changes since the Zebra and Quagga mussel invasion, the impacts of climate change, the development of coastal forecast systems, and harmful algal bloom forecasting. We urge the subcommittee to continue supporting this work by designating \$10 million in funding for the continued operation of the lab. We also support \$3 million for the Great Lakes Observing System. As part of a vast network, the system is a core component of the information infrastructure critical to safe navigation across the Lakes and responding to toxic spills, storms, and other coastal hazards.

Second, the growing threat of harmful algal blooms is of great concern to the region. New blooms are being fueled by excessive amounts of phosphorus washing into the lakes from urban and agricultural runoff. Moreover, stronger storms driven by climate change and the ecosystem impact of invasive mussels contribute to the problem. These 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. The Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act program empowers NOAA to work collaboratively with research partners to engage with this threat in the Great Lakes. Research seeks to use an integrated approach to understand the ecosystem dynamics and environmental drivers of these blooms to improve prediction and mitigation strategies. Harmful algal blooms are spreading farther and faster and beginning earlier than ever before and we must act to protect communities from this growing threat. We urge Congress to fund NOAA's activities by providing \$25 million for the program and its Competitive External Research grants.

We also urge Congress to continue supporting the other programs and partnerships that collaboratively support and enhance regional restoration efforts. The Sea Grant College program provides for a federal partnership with academic and research institutions to educate and inform the public on maintaining resilient communities and economies, sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, healthy coastal ecosystems, and promoting environmental literacy and workforce development. Its elimination, as the administration requests, 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 HABs. We support \$91.9 million for the program in the new fiscal year. Furthermore, we urge Congress to appropriate \$77 million for the Coastal Zone Management Grants. These grants are critical in supporting the participation of underfunded state agencies in the voluntary Coastal Zone Management Program that brings about coordination between state and federal regulators for the restoration and responsible development of our coastal communities and resources. We also support \$15 million for the Marine Debris Program that coordinates regional efforts for the prevention, research, monitoring, emergency response, and removal of debris, an effort that benefits coastal habitats, wildlife, and protects the public who use our region's waterways.

Third, we ask the Committee to support the efforts of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). NOAA is one of the critical contributing partners to the GLRI, an agency that is supplemented and enhanced by the GLRI and provides critical research capacity for the Great Lakes Region. The initiative is improving the lives of millions of people and has seen efforts undertaken or completed on more than 5,300 restoration projects throughout the region. Projects that are benefiting communities by cleaning up waters that are the drinking source for millions of homes and thousands of industries. Results, include:

- 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 11 additional AOCs have also been completed. In the previous two decades before the GLRI, only one AOC had been cleaned up.
- 80 beneficial use impairments (BUIs) were addressed in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin under the GLRI, more than seven times the total number of BUIs removed in the preceding 22 years.
- Combined with other funding, farmers have implemented nutrient management actions on nearly 2 million acres of rural lands through 2017 to reduce erosion and farm runoff that feeds toxic algal outbreaks. GLRI's supplemental funding is helping increase farmland under conservation around Western Lake Erie, Saginaw Bay, and Green Bay, reducing projected phosphorus runoff by over 1.1 million pounds.

- Over 5,250 river miles have been cleared of dams and barriers resulting in fish swimming into stretches of river where they have been absent for decades.

Investments in Great Lakes restoration create jobs and lead to long-term economic benefits for the Great Lakes states and the country. It is estimated that for every \$1 the GLRI invested through 2016 to clean up toxic hot spots in Areas of Concern (AOC), control invasive species, restore wildlife habitat, protect wetlands, and reduce harmful algae the investment will produce more than \$3 in additional economic activity regionwide through 2036. The GLRI is revitalizing our waterfronts and leading a resurgence in water-based outdoor recreation, increasing tourism across the region.

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. Moreover, emerging contaminants and a changing climate continue to exacerbate the challenges we face, many of which disproportionately impact people that have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice. Cutting funding will slow restoration efforts, allowing problems to get worse and making them more expensive to solve. Ultimately, cutting spending as proposed won’t save money—it will cost the nation more. As the source of drinking water for over 30 million Americans, 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 the region stands ready to continue this important federal partnership, ensuring that all benefit from and enjoy these investments in restoration and protection. 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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