



### Advocating for the Great Lakes: HOW Coalition Priorities for the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress

The 117<sup>th</sup> Congress has the opportunity to forcefully and effectively champion clean water priorities that achieve ecological outcomes, while addressing environmental injustices. Addressing systemic inequities leading to widespread water shutoffs in people's homes, persistent toxic lead contamination, and a growing water affordability crisis that, if not addressed, by 2022 will leave 1-in-3 Americans at risk of water bills they cannot afford to pay, is essential. Clean water is a basic need, and we must ensure federal investment and restoration efforts are equitable and resilient, so communities that have borne the brunt of environmental injustice are revitalized and no longer left behind.

We call on you and your colleagues to prioritize in the coming year, a strong Great Lakes restoration and clean water platform that ensures that all people have access to clean water by:

- Prioritizing providing and protecting access to safe, affordable, water for all during this [COVID-19 health crisis](#).
- Advancing the restoration and protection of the source of drinking water for over 30 million Americans by investing in the [Great Lakes Restoration Initiative](#) and other [clean water funding priorities](#). Ensuring federal efforts are considering the needs of, and prioritizing, our most vulnerable communities and those that have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice.
- Supporting efforts to address the [water infrastructure crisis](#) by ensuring the reauthorization of critical programs and expanding federal investments to fix our drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater systems. Ending water shutoffs, ensuring affordability for communities and ratepayers, and promoting resilient natural infrastructure solutions.
- Restoring and strengthening clean water protections to address the persistence of legacy pollutants, well-known contaminants like lead, emerging contaminants like PFAS, toxic algal blooms, and our changing climate, which affects everything.

More specifically, we call on Congress to:

#### ✓ **Prioritize COVID-19 Relief and Clean Water Access**

The new Congress must prioritize providing and protecting access to safe, affordable, water during the Covid-19 public health crisis. While we applaud the inclusion of a low-income assistance program in the most recent COVID relief package, Congress has failed to directly provide relief to communities struggling to prevent shutoffs and ensure safe supply and reconnections. The Coalition urges Congress [end water shutoffs and safely restore water](#) to each household for the duration of this crisis and provide assistance to households and utilities to continue to safely provide water service in these difficult times.

#### ✓ **Enhance Great Lakes Restoration and Resiliency**

The effectiveness of Great Lakes restoration programs, the ability to provide clean and affordable water, and the economic boon of building resilient communities is predicated on federal investment and partnership. We call on Congress to continue to support and

expand funding for clean water and Great Lakes restoration priorities through the annual appropriations process. A summary of key programs and funding recommendations can be found [here](#).

Central to our region's efforts is the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). An innovative program for resilient and adaptive landscape-scale restoration addressing long-term environmental damage and creating a resilient system that can adapt to climate change. For the last decade it has successfully met this challenge by cleaning up Areas of Concern (AOCs), restoring rivers and wetlands, reducing polluted runoff from farm fields and city streets, and stopping the spread of aquatic and terrestrial invasive species. The program is an economic success resulting in economic returns of more than 3 to 1, enhancing quality of life in a region defined by its waters. We urge Congress:

- Support at least \$375 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) in FY2022, consistent with the recently passed [GLRI Act](#). Ensuring that EPA, to the maximum extent practicable is using existing authorities to waive cost-share requirements, lowering the financial barriers for projects in low-income and disadvantaged communities.

Expanding accountability, improving collaboration, and achieving equitable outcomes are also essential challenges Congress must seek to address. Community-based collaboration was the hallmark of the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration, which began in 2005 under President George W. Bush's EPA. Thousands of individuals worked for a year on developing the region's Great Lakes restoration blueprint. The same thing happened early under the GLRI when states, non-governmental organizations, watershed groups, and others came together to assemble workplans that the GLRI could support.

Unfortunately, as implementation under the GLRI and Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement has proceeded, there has been a drift away from the initial emphasis on broad-based collaboration. Working together with Congress and the new Administration we hope to see Great Lakes restoration efforts move back towards these roots by reinvigorating stakeholder involvement and innovative collaborations to engage the diverse communities found across the region and begin to grapple with reaching underserved communities and those that have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice. We urge Congress work with the Administration to:

- Expand the membership of U.S. EPA's Great Lakes Advisory Board to between 15-20 in order to include additional conservation and environmental justice voices, which ensure the board more accurately reflects the region.
- Provide the U.S. EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office (GLNPO) with more staff and resources to enhance community outreach, providing more regular opportunities for the public to learn the results of restoration activities and contribute to project development in their communities. Community engagement is especially important in underserved communities where people may not know about Great Lakes restoration efforts, may not have been involved in project creation and/or implementation, or may not have been part of opportunities to create local benefits through these efforts.

- Direct GLNPO to establish best practices for the administration of Public Advisory Councils (PACs) tasked with providing community input for Area of Concern (AOC) cleanup efforts. Coordinating with relevant state agencies to increase the capacity of PACs to incorporate representation from all impacted communities, with a particular focus on educating and uplifting representation from underserved, low-income, and communities of color.
- Prioritize grants to communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities, recognizing ecosystem restoration can also revitalize our communities at the same time. Restoring previously used language in Requests for Applications that prioritized environmental justice, funded community engagement, and further promoted contracting with disadvantaged business enterprises.
- Support coordination with non-governmental organizations, coalitions, philanthropic partners, and the private sector to help identify local entities who may be able to do restoration work, helping them build the right capacity to develop proposals, apply for project funding, and manage grants awarded to them.
- Reconvene the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration to revisit the guiding “[Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes](#),” and evaluate the progress that has been made, the work that is left to be done, and the need to address the climate crisis and environmental justice.

An ongoing threat to Great Lakes restoration and the progress of the GLRI are the estimated 180 invasive species that have been introduced to our waters leading to more than \$200 million in annual damages and management costs. With an economy dependent on the recreational opportunities of its waters and a \$7 billion fishery, the looming threat of Asian carp and the ongoing battles being fought to control and eradicate countless other species emphasizes the need for a strong federal partnership. Congress must continue to:

- Fully fund actions being undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Coast Guard, and the U.S. Geological Survey to keep all four species of Asian carp out of the Great Lakes.
- Fund pre-construction engineering and design (PED) and initiate construction of the Brandon Road Lock & Dam project, a critical line of defense against the advance of the invasive Asian carp. Adjust the non-federal cost-share requirement to allow for construction at full federal expense in recognition of the projects urgent regional and bi-national importance.

#### ✓ **Invest in our Communities and Water Infrastructure**

The Great Lakes region is facing a water infrastructure crisis. Grappling with crumbling and unsafe [drinking water](#) and [wastewater](#) infrastructure, our communities need a staggering \$188 billion over the next 20 years to improve, upgrade, and repair drinking water and wastewater systems. This work is increasingly unaffordable as the federal contribution has declined precipitously over the last 4 decades, falling from 63 percent of water infrastructure spending to 9 percent today. Too often these [costs are being passed on to those who can least afford it](#), disproportionately impacting communities that have

historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice with water utility bills doubling or tripling over the last decade in many cities.

These challenges are only expected to get worse as a changing climate leads to more rainstorms that overwhelm sewer systems and contaminate drinking water sources, pushing our current infrastructure past its limits. Investing in our region's water infrastructure would not only protect public health but allow for important infrastructure upgrades improving the resiliency of our communities, reducing maintenance and operational costs, and creating good paying local jobs during this economic crisis. We urge Congress act quickly and lead a comprehensive federal response to the nation's water infrastructure crisis by:

1. Passing a comprehensive infrastructure package that invests over \$100 billion over the next five years to address the drinking water and wastewater infrastructure crisis.
  - Supporting at least \$10 billion annually for each of the EPA's Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds
    - Require at least 20 percent set-aside for additional subsidization, raise the 30 percent cap, and expand grant options instead of loans targeted at small and disadvantaged communities to address the affordability crisis our most vulnerable and under resourced communities face.
    - Codify the Green Project Reserve at no less than 20 percent, providing technical support and incentivizing the use of natural infrastructure that supports communities trying to end stormwater runoff and build resilience in the face of climate change.
    - Require states to give priority to projects in disadvantaged communities when developing annual project prioritization lists; use SRF funds for technical assistance to help these communities submit project proposals.
    - Promote economic development in these communities through local hiring and job training opportunities for local workforce development in SRF funded projects.
  - Supporting at least \$400 million annually for the EPA's Sec. 221 Sewer Overflow and Storm Reuse Municipal Grants
    - Reducing the non-federal cost share for financially distressed communities to a maximum of 25 percent and creating a 20 percent set-aside to help address the needs of small communities.
2. Address the lead water pollution public health crisis, supporting \$45 billion over ten years for a national program to fund full lead service line replacements.
  - Supporting \$4.5 billion annually for the lead service line replacement program, ensuring grant recipients fully replace service lines at their cost.

3. Fully funding critical water infrastructure programs to support the operation of public drinking water systems, providing targeted assistance to vulnerable communities, and addressing the need for workforce development to face this infrastructure crisis. In particular, we urge Congress:
  - Fund EPA’s Public Water System Supervision grant program at \$250 million annually to further enhance the capacity of state and tribal communities to ensure their local water systems comply with drinking water regulations.
  - Fund EPA’s Small and Disadvantaged Communities program at \$60 million annually to further assist public water systems in underinvested small and disadvantaged communities meet Safe Drinking Water Act requirements.
  - Fund EPA’s Water Infrastructure Workforce Development program at \$5 million annually to provide job training opportunities for careers in the water utility sector. Targeting job training in disadvantaged communities receiving infrastructure funds to promote local hiring, provide career development opportunities, and workforce for the long-term maintenance of projects.
  
4. Dedicating resources through the EPA and other relevant agencies to address the growing water affordability crisis. Federal protections are essential to protecting public health and providing safe drinking water, but too often the infrastructure costs of these critical protections are being passed on to communities who can least afford it. Those that have historically been underinvested in, bearing the brunt of environmental injustice. With water utility bills doubling or tripling over the last decade in many Great Lakes cities, Congress must:
  - Pass legislation to end water shutoffs for households due to their inability to pay.
  - Fund EPA efforts to provide financial and technical aid for states and utilities to develop innovative customer assistance programs. In addition to legislative action to establish a low-income water affordability program that provides assistance to families for their household water bills.