

**TESTIMONY OF HOWARD LEARNER**  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER**  
**IN SUPPORT OF THE GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE**  
**to the**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES**  
**March 14, 2023 – WASHINGTON D.C.**

I am Howard Learner, the Executive Director of the Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC), which is the Midwest's leading environmental legal advocacy and sustainability innovation organization. ELPC's staff works throughout the Great Lakes states, in Washington D.C. and with Canada to protect the Great Lakes. Since 2008, we have participated with policymakers and colleagues to build, effectively implement, and expand the successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI).

Thank you, Chair Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree and all members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of full funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative for FY2024 at \$425 million as provided in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2019 (signed into law on January 5, 2021). GLRI funds have been effectively deployed to protect safe clean drinking water supplies, clean up toxic sites, protect wetlands and shorelines, hold off invasive species from entering the Great Lakes, and safeguard aquatic resources. Restoring the Great Lakes creates substantial environmental, public health, and recreational benefits, as well as fostering economic growth. GLRI is a program that has worked very well and has demonstrated success consistently.

The Great Lakes are a global gem. They contain 21% of the planet's fresh water supply, and 42 million people rely on the Great Lakes for safe drinking water. They provide a rich aquatic habitat for many species. They support a \$7 billion annual fishing industry, and Great Lakes recreation draws millions of tourists who boost the economies of shoreline communities. In short, the Great Lakes are where many millions of people live, work and play.

ELPC strongly supported reauthorization of the GLRI and the ramp up of funding to \$475 million in 2026, matching the funding the program received in its initial year. **We request that the Committee fully fund the GLRI program with at least the authorized \$425 million for FY 2024 and, hopefully, consider a higher amount.**

I'll make two points in support of fully funding the GLRI:

**First**, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is vitally important, and it is successful. This is a model federal program providing significant environmental and economic benefits, and it is working well.

**Second**, the challenges to the Great Lakes from increases in harmful algal blooms and climate change merit full funding of at least the authorized \$425 million for FY 2024 and, again, the program could benefit from an even higher amount.

**1. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is vitally important and successful. This is a model federal program providing important benefits, and it is working well with strong bipartisan federal, state and local support.**

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has been a breakthrough program, injecting critical funding and structure that had been missing in order to restore the Lakes. Over the past 14 years, the GLRI has achieved strong results with sustained funding. As the third GLRI Action Plan states: “the GLRI has been a catalyst for unprecedented federal agency coordination, which has, in turn, produced unprecedented results.” The program supports shoreline and wetlands protection projects, keeping out invasive species, and reducing harmful algal blooms. Congress’ recognition of the effectiveness of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is reflected in the strong bipartisan support of fully funding this program with increasing funding.

The GLRI funds and supports thousands of projects across the Great Lakes states to:

- Improve water quality for safe drinking water supplies, fisheries and aquatic habitats.
- Protect shorelines and restore wetlands.
- Protect and restore native habitats and species.
- Help prevent and control invasive species.
- Clean up toxic sediments on lake bottoms.
- Reduce agricultural and other nutrient runoff that causes harmful algal blooms.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative creates an effective system of coordination among federal agencies, state entities and local partners to achieve important outcomes to make a meaningful difference for the Great Lakes. Since its inception, the program has achieved strong results with sustained funding.

There are countless examples of GLRI projects that deliver multiple benefits to the Great Lakes, from watershed and natural area restoration projects to addressing and ultimately delisting Areas of Concern. The [Healing Our Waters Coalition](#) provides examples of projects across the region. Projects include:

- **Rouge River Area of Concern (MI):** This heavily populated and industrialized area in southeast Michigan includes highly degraded natural habitat and high levels of contamination. Multiple GLRI-funded projects are addressing nine habitat areas including the Venoy Dorsey Park Habitat project to restore wetlands and stabilize streambanks.
- **Wequoick Creek Restoration (WI):** This project in Lake Michigan’s watershed is restoring Midwestern oak savanna/wet meadow and riparian forest adjacent to the Point au Sable Nature Reserve in lower Green Bay, Wisconsin. The project will control invasive species and restore a native riparian corridor.
- **Grand Marais (MN):** This project will update stormwater management for the City of Grand Marais with wetlands, trees and riparian habitat to store and filter stormwater to reduce flooding. This project will address increasing storm intensity and add native plants to the areas to better protect Lake Superior.

GLRI projects bring together a broad array of partners to achieve the program's goals and create jobs. The GLRI Action Plan III details work to address Areas of Concern, including those that are now delisted: Ashtabula River in Ohio, Lower Menominee River in Wisconsin, Presque Isle Bay in Pennsylvania, and Deer Lake and White Lake in Michigan. Significant work remains to be done, however, to fully address the 25 Areas of Concern across the Great Lakes basin. We greatly appreciate that the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act added \$1 billion for the GLRI to accelerate clean up and restoration of these toxic Areas of Concern.

GLRI has broad regional economic benefits. A University of Michigan study showed that every federal dollar spent on GLRI projects between 2010 and 2016 will produce \$3.35 in additional economic activity in the Great Lakes region through 2036.

**2. The challenges to the Great Lakes from fluctuating lake levels and increases in harmful algal blooms and climate change merit full funding of at least the authorized \$425 million for FY 2024, and we urge Congress to consider an even higher amount.**

While recognizing the GLRI's success, the growing threats from climate change and recurring severe algal outbreaks are getting worse.

ELPC commissioned 18 leading Midwest and Canadian university and research center scientists to write the state-of-the-science report, *An Assessment of the Impacts of Climate Change on the Great Lakes*, which we released in 2019, along with recommended policy solutions. The scientists concluded that climate change is causing significant and far-reaching impacts on the Great Lakes region, including increasingly extreme water level fluctuations, which wreak havoc on communities, homes, beaches, businesses and the overall shoreline's built environment. Annual precipitation in the region has increased at a higher percentage than in the rest of the country, and more precipitation is coming in unusually large events, such as derechos and intense storms. Lake Michigan had record-high water levels in 2021 -- especially when whipped by strong winds and large waves, this caused extensive flooding that damaged the shoreline and infrastructure.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 2022 was the 6<sup>th</sup> hottest year on record as climate change continues to impact the Great Lakes region.

ELPC issued a report in June 2022 focused on the threats to people, communities and businesses from high Lake Michigan water and wave levels, *Rising Waters: Climate Change Impacts and Toxic Risks to Lake Michigan's Shoreline Communities*. Using NOAA's Enhanced Digital Elevation Model data, this report visualizes the extent and severity of inundation at 12 hot spots along Lake Michigan's shoreline and surrounding areas due to extreme weather events of the scale expected in the near future. This report points to opportunities for the GLRI and other programs to invest in projects that will enhance coastal protection and resilience, and flood control.

Climate change impacts on the Great Lakes also exacerbate the growing problem of agricultural runoff pollution – mostly fertilizers and manure – that is the principal cause of severe recurring toxic algae outbreaks in western Lake Erie and other Great Lakes shallow water bays. The Ohio EPA concluded that agricultural runoff pollution accounts for about 90% of the phosphorus flowing into western Lake Erie.

The current GLRI Action Plan provides a detailed look at strategies to reduce this harmful agricultural runoff pollution, noting that GLRI projects have kept more than one million pounds of phosphorous out of the Great Lakes. The nutrient pollution threats from CAFOs to the Great Lakes region, including those in the Maumee River flowing into Lake Erie, continue and are amplified by changing rainfall patterns. GLRI funds could be used to support wetlands restoration to more effectively capture phosphorous, and water testing and monitoring to identify effective approaches to reducing runoff. A more robust GLRI will continue to be an important source of solutions to address this urgent problem.

In conclusion, the Environmental Law & Policy Center and I commend the House Appropriations Committee and this Subcommittee's strong support for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative with each year's budget. GLRI is a successful program and a model for federal, state and local cooperation. We urge the Committee to fully fund the program with at least the authorized \$425 million for FY 2024 and, also, to consider additional funding.