

**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 INTEROR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
APRIL 10, 2024 – WASHINGTON D.C.**

I am Howard Learner, Executive Director of the Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC), 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, ELPC has engaged with policymakers and partners 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 FY 2025 at \$450 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, while fostering economic growth. GLRI is a program that has worked very well and has demonstrated consistent successes.

The Great Lakes are a global gem. They contain 21% of the planet's surface 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 \$450 million for FY 2025 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 \$450 million for FY 2025 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 pollution 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. Below are three examples of projects from smaller more community-based work to major projects to clean up waterways. The [Healing Our Waters Coalition](#) provides additional examples of projects across the Great Lakes region.

- [Powderhorn Prairie and Marsh Nature Preserve on Chicago’s Southeast Side](#): This project next to the Calumet Area of Concern restored 192 acres of wetland habitat, 630 linear feet of stream habitat and 45 acres of native vegetation, in an area burdened by industrial pollution and flooding. This project benefits the community with decreased flooding and reconnected Powderhorn Lake with Wolf Lake and Lake Michigan, allowing passage for native fish and wildlife.
- [Gorge Dam Removal, Cuyahoga River](#): This project will remove 100 years of accumulated dangerous sediment (nearly 900,000 cubic yards) that sits behind the Gorge Dam to allow for its removal. This project will improve water quality in the Cuyahoga River and bring recreational opportunities and economic development. The four local partners include the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, the city of Akron, FirstEnergy, and the Ohio EPA.

- **Milwaukee Waterways Clean Up**: This multi-year project will address a century of pollution entering the Milwaukee River, the Menomonee River, and Milwaukee’s Inner Harbor creating an “area of concern.” This project will result in cleaner water, safer fish, and access to recreation. The five local partners on the project include the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, We Energies, the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County Parks.

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 (AOC). As of October 2023, six AOCs have been delisted including the Ashtabula River in Ohio, Lower Menominee River in Wisconsin, Presque Isle Bay in Pennsylvania, and Deer Lake and White Lake in Michigan and work toward delisting has been completed in ten areas. Significant work remains to be done, however, to fully address Areas of Concern across the Great Lakes basin.

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 \$450 million for FY 2025, 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 Midwestern 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), December 2023 through February 2024 was the warmest such winter time period on record. NOAA reports that “[t]here is a 45% chance that 2024 will be the warmest year in NOAA’s 175-year record and a 99% chance it will rank in the top five.” Climate change impacts 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, resilience, and flood control.

Climate change impacts on the Great Lakes also exacerbate the growing problem of agricultural pollution – mostly fertilizers and animal waste – that is the principal cause of severe recurring toxic algae outbreaks in western Lake Erie and other Great Lakes areas like Green Bay. The Ohio EPA concluded that agricultural 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 pollution, noting that GLRI projects have kept more than one million pounds of phosphorus out of the Great Lakes. Nutrient pollution threats to the Great Lakes region continue, and are amplified by changing rainfall patterns. Industrial-scale animal production facilities, often called concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) produce enormous volumes of waste, including those in the Maumee River basin flowing into Lake Erie. GLRI funds could be used to support wetlands restoration to more effectively capture phosphorus, and water testing and monitoring to identify effective approaches to reducing agricultural pollution. A more robust GLRI will continue to be an important source of solutions for 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 \$450 million for FY 2025 and, also, to consider additional funding. In addition to this funding request, the Environmental Law & Policy Center is pleased to support H.R. 7257, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2024 to extend the program through FY 2031.