

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
April 3, 2025 – 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, Ontario and Quebec, and nationally 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 2026 at \$475 million as provided in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2019. 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, and fosters economic growth at the same time. 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 that supports 75,000 jobs. Great Lakes recreation attracts and engages millions of tourists generating as much as \$15 billion annually, thereby boosting 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 \$475 million for FY 2026. In addition, we urge the Subcommittee to ensure the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is funded for FY 2026 at the level necessary to ensure the staffing and expertise needed to effectively implement the GLRI, including through EPA's Region 5 office and the Great Lakes National Program Office in Chicago.**

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

First, 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.

Second, 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 \$475 million for FY 2026.

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 15 years, the GLRI has achieved strong results with sustained funding. As the Fourth 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, this program has achieved strong results with sustained funding.

There are many 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. Here are some examples of projects from smaller, more community-based work to major projects to clean up waterways. The [Healing Our Waters Coalition](#) identifies many more examples of projects across the Great Lakes region.

- [Powderhorn Prairie and Marsh Nature Preserve](#) – **Chicago, IL**: 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 long burdened by industrial pollution and flooding. This project benefits the community by decreasing flooding and reconnecting Powderhorn Lake with Wolf Lake and Lake Michigan, which allows passage for native fish and wildlife.
- [Muskegon Lake AOC](#) – **Muskegon, MI**: The final Beneficial Use Impairment was resolved for this Area of Concern in Fall 2024, and that last step was key to extensive fish and wildlife habitat restoration. Delisting this Area of Concern will take place in 2025.

- [Gorge Dam Removal, Cuyahoga River](#) – **Akron, OH**: This project will remove 100 years of accumulated dangerous sediment (nearly 900,000 cubic yards) that sits behind the Gorge Dam in order 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, City of Akron, FirstEnergy and the Ohio EPA.
- [Clark Island and Delaware/Horseshoe Island](#) – **Maumee River, OH**: This [project](#), now nearing completion, leverages GLRI funds with additional funding from the State of Ohio, to improve these two islands in the Maumee River. The project will improve water quality and wildlife habitat, help reduce pollution causing harmful algal blooms, and increase recreational opportunities.
- [Milwaukee Waterways Clean Up](#) – **Milwaukee, WI**: This multi-year project will address a century of pollution entering the [Milwaukee River](#), [Menomonee River](#), [Kinnickinnic River](#), and Milwaukee’s Inner Harbor creating an “area of concern.” This project will result in cleaner water, safer fish and improved access to recreation. The five agency partners on the project include the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, We Energies, City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County Parks. These agencies and community organizations have come together to form the [Waterway Restoration Partnership](#) to implement efforts to clean up and restore this Area of Concern.
- [Allouez Bay Wetlands Restoration](#) – **St. Louis River, WI**: This project is transforming a Lake Superior coastal wetland into a healthy habitat for wildlife and recreation. This project is part of a larger restoration of the St. Louis River system.

GLRI projects bring together a broad array of partners to achieve the program’s goals and create jobs. The current GLRI Action Plan details work to address Areas of Concern. As of October 2024, seven Areas of Concern have been delisted including the Rochester Embayment (Delisted in October 2024), Ashtabula River in Ohio, Lower Menomonee 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 Areas of Concerns across the Great Lakes basin. Work on Areas of Concern is ongoing, but there are concerns that federal budget cuts could delay or stop important work to remove contaminated sediments, improve beach health, and restore fish and wildlife habitat.

GLRI has compelling 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 \$475 million for FY 2026.

While recognizing the GLRI’s success, the growing threats from recurring severe algal outbreaks and climate change 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. 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 has reached record-high water levels – especially when whipped by strong winds and large waves, which caused extensive flooding that damaged the shoreline and infrastructure.

On January 10, 2025, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced that 2024 was the hottest year on record. The ten warmest years on record have all occurred in the last decade. Due to warmer temperatures, Great Lakes ice coverage in February 2024 was historically low, which can cause adverse impacts for the health of the Great Lakes.

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 manure – that is the principal cause of severe recurring harmful algae outbreaks in western Lake Erie and other Great Lakes areas like Green Bay, Wisconsin. 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 they are amplified by changing rainfall patterns. Industrial-scale animal production facilities, often called concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) produce enormous volumes of manure, including those in the Maumee River basin that flow into western Lake Erie. GLRI funds could be used to support wetlands restoration to more effectively capture phosphorus, and, also, 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's and this Subcommittee's strong support for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative with each year's budget. GLRI is a successful program that is a model for federal, state and local cooperation. We urge the Committee to fully fund the program with at least the authorized \$475 million for FY 2026. In addition to this funding request, the Environmental Law & Policy Center is pleased to support H.R. 284, the bipartisan Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2025 to extend the program through FY 2031.