

**TESTIMONY OF HOWARD LEARNER  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER  
IN SUPPORT OF THE GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE  
TO THE  
U.S. SENATE, APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES  
May 14, 2026 – WASHINGTON D.C.**

I am Howard Learner, Chief Executive Officer 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 Murkowski, Ranking Member Merkley, and all Subcommittee members for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of full funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative for FY 2027 at \$500 million as provided in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2025. 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, fisheries, public health and outdoor recreational benefits, and this restoration advances 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 freshwater 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 in 2019 and the bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the program by September 30, 2026, at \$500 million. **We request that the Committee fully fund the GLRI program with at least the authorized \$500 million for FY 2027. In addition, we urge the Subcommittee to ensure the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is funded for FY 2027 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 for FY 2027:

**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 \$500 million for FY 2027.

**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 providing the critical funding and structure that were previously lacking to effectively restore the Great Lakes. Since its inception in 2009, the GLRI has achieved strong results with sustained funding. As noted in the Fourth GLRI Action Plan: “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 program’s effectiveness is reflected in its consistently strong bipartisan commitment to robust GLRI funding.

The GLRI program 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 supporting more than 8,000 projects.

There are numerous examples of GLRI projects that deliver multiple benefits to the Great Lakes ranging 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:

- **[Gorge Dam Removal, Cuyahoga River](#) – Akron, OH:** This project, which was launched in 2025, will remove 100 years of accumulated dangerous sediment (nearly 900,000 cubic yards) that sits behind the Gorge Dam thereby enabling the dam’s removal. This project will improve water quality in the Cuyahoga River and bring recreational opportunities and economic development. This GLRI project brings together a number of partners including: U.S. EPA, Ohio EPA, Ohio Lake Erie Commission, the cities of Akron and Cuyahoga Falls, Summit Metro Parks, and Summit County.
- **[Muskegon Lake Area of Concern](#) – Muskegon, MI:** On October 1, 2025, Muskegon Lake was removed from the list of Great Lakes Areas of Concern. According to a [study](#) from Grand Valley State University, remediation and restoration of Muskegon Lake will deliver substantial economic benefits to the community including: increased revenue from the recreation economy of \$28 million a year; increased marina activity; and a 45% increase in county hotel room tax collections. The projections anticipate a nearly 6-to-1 return on investment ratio.

- [Saginaw Bay Channel Island Reef](#) – **Saginaw, MI**: This project, completed in October 2025, creates habitat for a variety of native fish including white fish that are declining across the Great Lakes. This project brought together many partners, including: Michigan Department of Natural Resources; Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; private entities; Michigan Sea Grant; Michigan State University Extension; and Purdue University.
- [Grand Calumet River Area of Concern](#) – **Northwest Indiana**: The newly-announced GLRI project accelerates ongoing work to rehabilitate the Grand Calumet River by removing more than 240,000 cubic yards of contaminated canal and river bottom sediment across a combined area of 100 acres. This project brings together the U.S. EPA and Atlantic Richfield Company, BP Products North America, and the East Chicago Waterway Management District.
- [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: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District; City of Milwaukee; Milwaukee County Parks; and We Energies. 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.

GLRI projects bring together a broad array of partners to achieve the program’s goals and create jobs. For example, the current GLRI Action Plan details work to address Areas of Concern. As of October 2025, eight AOCs have been fully delisted, and an additional nine AOCs have completed all management actions necessary for delisting. The delisted Areas of Concern include the newly completed Muskegon Lake site, the Rochester Embayment, Ashtabula River in Ohio, Lower Menominee River in Wisconsin, Presque Isle Bay in Pennsylvania, and Deer Lake and White Lake in Michigan. 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 \$500 million for FY 2027 appropriations.**

While recognizing the GLRI’s success, the growing threats from climate change and recurring severe algal outbreaks are getting worse. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced that 2025 was the third hottest year on record. The ten warmest years on record have all occurred in the last decade.

In July 2025, scientists commissioned by the Environmental Law & Policy Center issued an [update](#) reaffirming the conclusions of their comprehensive state-of-the-science report *An Assessment of*

*the Impacts of Climate Change on the Great Lakes*, which was released in 2019. The 2025 update confirmed the 2019 Report’s core findings, documented increased warming across the Great Lakes, and recognized shifting rainfall patterns and growing impacts on public health.

ELPC also 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 under extreme weather events projected to occur in the near future. The findings point 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 excess fertilizers and animal manure spread on fields – that is the principal cause of severe recurring harmful algae outbreaks in western Lake Erie and other Great Lakes areas such as 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 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. 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 Senate 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 \$500 million for FY 2027. In addition to this funding request, the Environmental Law & Policy Center is pleased to support S. 528, the bipartisan Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act of 2025, to extend the program through FY 2031.