

# Clean Water for All Depends on a Strong Democracy

## Right to Clean Water

The Healing Our Waters–Great Lakes Coalition believes that our nation’s water resources are essential to support clean drinking water, healthy communities, outdoor recreation, local economies, and abundant fish and wildlife. We believe that every person has the right to safe and affordable drinking water. As trustee of our water resources, governments at all levels are responsible for maintaining, protecting, and restoring the nation’s water resources for the benefit of all people. The environmental stewardship of the nation’s waters—including the Great Lakes and the waters that feed them, such as rivers, streams, wetlands and groundwater—requires the investment of resources and the establishment and enforcement of policies that protect the environment and the health of the millions of people who depend on them for their drinking water, health, recreation, jobs, and quality of life.

## Right to Participate in Decisions

The Coalition believes that people and communities have the right to participate in decisions that impact their health, the health of their communities, and the health of the environment around them. We believe that all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, deserve to be treated fairly and have meaningful involvement in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Having access to and agency in the decision-making process is essential to ensure that everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards.

Unfortunately, throughout the nation’s history, the exclusion and neglect of community input in decisions—especially low-income and communities of color—and systemic racism has led to a history of environmental injustices that have polluted neighborhoods and poisoned people. Disturbingly, the most vulnerable communities have borne a disproportionate share of pollution and environmental degradation, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Low-income communities, people of color, and indigenous people are more likely to suffer the serious health impacts of pollution—from families in cities who suffer lead poisoning due to aging infrastructure to people in

rural communities who cannot drink their well water because of toxic PFAS contamination. These disparities have been created in part by policies that have segregated communities, barred access to economic opportunity, and excluded some groups of people from decision making. These impacts of systemic racism and differing access to power have caused lasting harm for some of our communities and the people who live in them.

## Strong Democracy Central to Healthy Communities, Healthy Environment

Environmental policies, practices, and enforcement are stronger, more effective, and more equitable when the American public has the opportunity to participate in decision-making—whether a policy to set the limits of pollution in their community or an election to decide who will represent their interests in the halls of government. America’s democratic electoral process at local, state, and federal levels of government is a critical component in protecting the health of our communities and our water resources—as well as ensuring that no community has to disproportionately bear the brunt of pollution and environmental harm.

The Healing Our Waters–Great Lakes Coalition supports actions that encourage and uphold the rights of U.S. residents to participate in our democracy, vote in elections, and provide input when decisions are being made in their communities. We support actions to make voting as accessible and easy as possible to help all eligible Americans participate in the democratic process. And we support efforts to bring communities that have historically been marginalized and silenced into our democracy so that their voices are heard.

