



## Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition

Talking Points: EPA Public Listening Session on Great Lakes Restoration Action Plan 2024-2028

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**TOPLINE MESSAGE:** The next GLRI Action Plan and complementary federal investments must accelerate public health, regional economic revitalization, and ecological resilience. While we don't recommend a re-write of the Action Plan, certain critical updates are needed to achieve these critical outcomes. Namely, a greater focus on assisting communities in preparing and adapting to climate change, as well as making sure that the communities most impacted by pollution and environmental harm are being supported and prioritized in restoration actions.

**OVERVIEW:** These talking points are to be used by Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition members and partners to inform the GLRI agencies on how best to update the agencies' next Great Lakes Action Plan, which will be released in 2024. The agencies' Great Lakes Action Plan will guide federal investments to restore and protect the Great Lakes and stands to benefit the millions of people who depend on the Great Lakes for their drinking water, public health, jobs, and quality of life.

The overall goal of this outreach is to secure an updated federal Action Plan for Great Lakes restoration investments that addresses environmental injustices, prepares communities for the impacts of climate change, and sets new restoration priorities in light of public health needs, regional economic revitalization, and the evolving ecology of the Lakes. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan IV will be our primary mechanism to achieve this goal in the absence of an Executive Order or other directive.

**BACKGROUND:** The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) has been and continues to be an extraordinary success. The federal program has invested \$3.8 billion to clean up toxic pollution, reduce runoff pollution, prevent and control invasive species, restore habitat, and educate young people. The GLRI has funded substantial scientific research that is informing current solutions and outlining problems yet to be solved. The program enjoys broad bipartisan support, and has been assessed as effective by the Government Accountability Office.

Federal investments to restore and protect the Great Lakes are producing results in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, on Tribal, municipal, and federal lands. But serious threats remain, some of which can be addressed through the GLRI, while other challenges require a different framework and approach. Over the past several months, the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition has led an effort to assess what progress has been made, what remains to be done, and what has been missed in the nearly 20-year-old Great Lakes restoration effort. The Coalition has put together recommendations that it believes will help transform the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative into a program to be responsive to the threats the Great Lakes face today and into the future, and we believe that we have a tremendous opportunity to re-energize the GLRI and our

broader restoration agenda for the next decade and beyond and ensure the anticipated annual increases in investment meets the needs of today and tomorrow.

To that end, the Coalition is urging its members and allies to engage with the EPA to help shape the next Great Lakes Action Plan. Every five years the EPA develops a new Action Plan to guide federal GLRI investments and agency actions. The current plan—Action Plan III—is set to expire in 2024. The EPA is gathering input this summer for the formation of Action Plan IV, which will cover federal fiscal years 2025 through 2029. The EPA anticipates to finalize Action Plan IV by September 2024.

A top priority for the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition is to secure a strong Action Plan IV so that federal investments reflect Coalition and community conservation priorities, the agencies can be held accountable, and, ultimately, all of the communities in the region can benefit from Great Lakes and clean water investments.

Over the past several months, the Coalition has worked to develop recommendations for Action Plan IV and its five focus areas to achieve the GLRI's long-term goals.

#### **NEEDS:**

The Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition is prioritizing three needs in an updated Action Plan:

1. Making the region more resilient in the face of climate change;
2. Promoting equity, that is, supporting communities most impacted by pollution and harm; and
3. Continuing to accelerate steps to revitalize public, economic, and Great Lakes ecosystem health.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

To achieve these needs, we have three categories of recommendations:

1. Strengthening the capacity of historically-underserved communities in decision making, collaboratives, workforce development, job training, and other resilience efforts;
2. Investing in tools for projects in communities most impacted by pollution and environmental harm (e.g., EPA's Environmental Justice Screening Tool, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, nature-based coastal resilience support tools).
3. Advancing adaptive projects that will keep up the momentum for public, economic, and ecological health.

#### **FOCUS AREA 1: TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND AREAS OF CONCERN**

- The proposed changes to this focus area center on strengthening equity in achieving the cleanup of AOCs and the protection of public health from toxic pollution. The changes will accomplish this in two ways: facilitating broader input in the Public Advisory Councils (PACs) that oversee the cleanup of the AOCs, and by incorporating the use of Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

## **FOCUS AREA 2: INVASIVE SPECIES**

- The proposed changes strengthen the GLRI’s prevention efforts and equity measures through the recognition and incorporation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and through more direct and specific language in the Measures of Progress.

## **FOCUS AREA 3: NONPOINT SOURCE POLLUTION IMPACTS ON NEARSHORE HEALTH**

- This area retains its emphasis on preventing and managing nutrient runoff. The proposed changes seek new tools and includes a new Objective: 3.4 Support innovative coastal approaches.
- Changes will support upstream (rural) and downstream (urban) collaboratives as a way to solve problems—particularly agricultural runoff—on a watershed scale. This builds on innovative approaches to harness resources for upstream pollution prevention.
- Additional changes also link flooding to polluted runoff and look to harness the power of the Farm Bill—which pays farmers to take specific actions to improve soil and water quality—to maximize progress.

## **FOCUS AREA 4: HABITAT RESTORATION AND NATIVE SPECIES**

- This focus area is intended to strengthen the biodiversity of the region by building more resilient habitat that intentionally includes Tribes and parties historically left out of these plans and decisions.
- Two new Objectives are being proposed: 4.3 Support habitat restoration and protection in and around historically underserved communities; and 4.4 Support self-sustaining native fisheries.

## **FOCUS AREA 5: FOUNDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESTORATION ACTIONS**

- This focus area needs to more explicitly address climate change and equity, by focusing research, education, and science to advance specific outcomes.