

Three Priority Actions for a Cleaner Lake Erie and an Assessment of Progress by Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario

A Crisis and an Opportunity

Two years ago, the Great Lakes region applauded when the Governors of Ohio and Michigan joined with the Premier of Ontario to commit to reducing the amount of runoff pollution, specifically phosphorus, flowing into western Lake Erie by 40 percent. The commitment marked a promise to the people of Lake Erie – a promise of a lake nearly free of harmful algal blooms and a significant reduction in risk to people and the lake. The region’s leaders knew, as did the people around the region, that the goal was ambitious but unequivocally needed.

Unfortunately, progress has been painfully slow. Ohio, Michigan and Ontario are on the hook to create clear pollution reduction plans. Sadly the draft plans released so far have been unambitious, vague, and lacking enforcement requirements. Additionally, the jurisdictions have not provided the necessary resources to ensure implementation of the plans.

Progress can be made by the Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario governments by starting with three key items:

- Completely **ban manure and fertilizer spreading** on frozen or saturated ground,
- Require **comprehensive nutrient reduction plans** by farms in the Lake Erie basin that result in clean, not polluted, water coming off of farm fields, and
- Improve **water quality monitoring** of the waterways flowing into Lake Erie.

The science is clear that agricultural practices are the primary source of the runoff pollution causing Lake Erie’s harmful algal blooms. **These three actions are first steps to move the Lake Erie region toward a future where clean water flowing off of farm fields and into the lake becomes the norm.**

An Assessment of Progress

The Alliance for the Great Lakes, Freshwater Future, Michigan League of Conservation Voters, and Ohio Environmental Council teamed up to assess progress on each of these needs. The groups reviewed current legislation, regulations and policy in each jurisdiction and consulted with experts from both the public and private sector to compile this assessment.

Ban manure and fertilizer spreading on frozen or saturated ground

| | Non-existent | Incomplete | Complete |
|----------|--------------|------------|----------|
| Ohio | | ✓ | |
| Michigan | ✓ | | |
| Ontario | | ✓ | |

Ohio and Ontario each have restrictions for manure or fertilizer application on frozen, snow-covered, and saturated ground. However, both jurisdiction’s policies have significant loopholes that allow this practice to continue. Michigan has no comprehensive regulations, but has a limited policy that only applies to permitted Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), which are farms with large animal herds.

Policies in each jurisdiction should be improved to completely ban this unnecessary practice by eliminating existing loopholes.

Require comprehensive nutrient reduction plans by all farms in the Lake Erie basin that result in clean water coming off of farm fields

| | Non-existent | Incomplete | Complete |
|----------|--------------|------------|----------|
| Ohio | | ✓ | |
| Michigan | ✓ | | |
| Ontario | | ✓ | |

Ohio and Ontario each have policies related to nutrient reduction (or nutrient management) planning, however requirements fall short of being comprehensive. Ohio requires nutrient reduction plans for farms with large animal herds, but leaves nutrient reduction planning optional for all other farms. In Ontario, nutrient reduction plans are only required for livestock farms of a certain size, leaving a large portion of farms unaffected by legislation, and plans are not required for field crop operations. Michigan does not have an enforceable policy. Instead the state has an optional statewide program that includes nutrient reduction planning.

Each jurisdiction should require comprehensive nutrient reduction planning for all agricultural producers that includes nutrient application as well as regular soil testing and implementation of best management practices, ensuring the elimination of runoff pollution.

Improve water quality monitoring of the waterways flowing into Lake Erie

| | Non-existent | Incomplete | Complete |
|----------|--------------|------------|----------|
| Ohio | | ✓ | |
| Michigan | | ✓ | |
| Ontario | | ✓ | |

While Ohio, Ontario, and Michigan all conduct some form of regular water quality monitoring, there is little consistency across the jurisdictions. Monitoring practices vary by protocol, the watershed scale at which monitoring takes place, frequency, and other factors. Current monitoring programs fail to consistently and accurately track actual reductions in phosphorus loadings and sources.

Monitoring programs should be improved across the region to effectively track and report on progress toward the 40% reduction goal and a clean, healthy Lake Erie.

