



ALLIANCE *for the*  
GREAT LAKES

Fall 2019

# Watermarks



**Building A Clean  
Water Legacy**



## Building A Clean Water Legacy

This summer we marked the anniversaries of two grim Great Lakes events. Fifty years ago, the Cuyahoga River was so polluted it caught on fire. Five years ago, a harmful algal bloom turned toxic and shut down access to safe drinking water in Toledo, Ohio. Both anniversaries mark clean water threats that also sparked major movements across the Great Lakes and the nation to clean up our water. While much work remains to rescue Lake Erie, we see huge gains in the fifty years since the Cuyahoga fire that captivated the nation, proving that we can reclaim the water that belongs to us all.

Next year, we'll celebrate 50 years since the founding of Lake Michigan Federation, which would grow to become the Alliance for the Great Lakes. That same year saw the establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency. And in the years that followed, Congress passed the Clean Water Act and many of our nation's bedrock water protections. Next year also marks five years since our leadership in the passage of the Microbead Free Waters Act of 2015, the largest national action preventing plastic pollution to date.

As I reflect on the past and present of our movement, I feel grateful and humbled to be in the fight for clean water alongside all of you, our supporters and champions.

I've seen our movement come together to stop microplastic pollution at the community, state, and eventually the federal level. Your support made the Alliance a leader in that fight. I've seen farmers, businesses, and local leaders join together to make long-term commitments to clean water and a healthy Green Bay and Fox River. I've seen communities come together to say no to polluters and demand an environmentally just future for their neighborhoods and the waters that connect them to the Great Lakes.

It should go without question that every Great Lakes neighborhood and community deserves to enjoy safe and clean water, and it is only because of people like you that we can help make that possible. With your support, the Alliance for the Great Lakes is poised to enter the next 50 years as a powerful leader in the clean water movement.

Thank you.



**Joel Brammeier**, President & CEO

# Rebuilding Trust at the Tap



**“You’re telling people: don’t drink the water. Don’t even touch it,”** said John C. Jones, community liaison for ProMedica health system, as he recalled the city of Toledo’s 2014 water crisis.

“Don’t drink it is one thing, but being told you can’t touch the water brings a whole other level to [the situation].”

Five years ago, toxins from a massive harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie, which supplies Toledo’s drinking water, contaminated the city’s drinking water systems. In the very early morning hours of August 2, 2014, more than half a million Toledo-area residents were ordered not to drink or even touch their water. The order lasted for nearly three days. A few weeks later residents of Pelee Island, Ontario faced a similar crisis lasting nearly two weeks. While Toledo has invested millions to improve drinking water treatment, the city’s story offers an example of the challenges of rebuilding trust at the tap.

Jones explained the challenge of messaging to the public in the midst of the water crisis, “So you’re trying to manage the panic, but you’re also trying to make people be non-apathetic.”

## Five Years Later: Lessons From the Toledo Water Crisis

On August 2nd, 2014, residents of Toledo, Ohio awoke to urgent warnings not to drink or use their tap water. Half a million people were unable to drink their water, cook with it, or brush their teeth. The cause? Toxins from a harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie, the source of Toledo’s drinking water. To mark the 5th anniversary, we went to Toledo to talk to communities on the front lines about the 2014 crisis and its aftermath. Hear from them directly in video interviews at [www.GreatLakes.org/Toledo-5th](http://www.GreatLakes.org/Toledo-5th)

“On the second day of the crisis, they brought in the National Guard to deliver water,” said Alexis Smith, Restorative Justice Director at Junction Coalition. The group is a Toledo-based community organization focused on economic, social, and environmental justice.

Today, a lot of the young people and families Smith works with remain skeptical about their water. “I know a lot of people who still don’t drink tap water,” she explained.

In the wake of the water crisis caused by agricultural run-off pollution, Junction Coalition takes extra care to design sustainable green spaces. *(continued of next page)*





John C. Jones

While the root cause of algal blooms ultimately lies with large-scale agriculture, Junction Coalition started community gardens to give neighbors a greater sense of control over their food and water.

"We're not waiting for anyone to be our superhero," said Alicia Smith, director of Junction Coalition. "We'll be our own heroes."

As Smith walked through Junction Coalition's garden, where young people from the neighborhood help plant and care for vegetables, she pointed out different crops. She stressed that neighbors not only grow and harvest their own food, but the gardens spark conversation about sustainable agriculture and clean water.

Jones acknowledged the current effort by the community and environmentalists to address the root causes of algal blooms. Yet he emphasized that the work won't be done until people can trust the water coming out of their taps. "I don't think this movement is moving as fast as it should to provide assurance that clean water will be provided going forward," Jones said.

"We are the public in public health," Smith said, emphasizing that it is the state's responsibility to protect clean drinking water. "Where's the guarantee that this won't happen again?"



Alicia and Alexis Smith

# Slow-going to Reduce Harmful Algal Blooms as Small Businesses and Communities Continue to Take a Hit



**// t stinks....**The best thing I can think to describe it is if you remember Grandma's attic, that musty smell," said Dave Spangler, president of the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association, describing the blanket of algae that covers western Lake Erie each year. "It gets so thick that it slows the boats."

Every year, agricultural runoff pollution causes massive harmful algal blooms to cover parts of the western Lake Erie basin. The blooms undermine the region's economy, including small business owners like Spangler, and threaten drinking water for millions of people around the lake.

"The fish will move somewhere else because there's less oxygen in the water," said Spangler. He later added, "When people see the big blooms, folks decide, 'I'm going to take my vacation in some other place.'"

Spangler emphasized the ongoing impact of algae on business. The fishing and charter boat industry is hit particularly hard every year, along with tourism and recreation. He estimates charter boat businesses lose about 10 percent of their income due to the algal blooms, a challenge for a seasonal business with precious little time to make up lost revenue each year.

One year after the Toledo crisis, Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario's elected leaders committed to a 40 percent reduction of phosphorus in Lake Erie by 2025. Phosphorous, which flows off agricultural lands, is the key pollutant causing the harmful algal blooms. The agreement included



Lake Erie algae sample

One year after the Toledo crisis, Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario's elected leaders committed to a 40 percent reduction of phosphorus in Lake Erie by 2025.

an interim goal of a 20 percent reduction by 2020. Although it is not yet 2020, all signs indicate that the interim goal will not be met. This is disappointing news for the millions of people who rely on Lake Erie for their drinking water and economic well-being.

Spangler has been to Columbus, Ohio's state capitol, many times to emphasize the human, environmental, and economic impacts of this perennial problem and to call for action. Funding to tackle the pollution sources



Lake Erie Charter Boat Association President Dave Spangler shares his view of Lake Erie's harmful algal bloom crisis.

causing algal blooms will be a big help in addressing the problem, Spangler said.

Some progress has been made. In July, Ohio Governor Dewine signed into law the H2Ohio Fund, which provides \$172 million to address the pollution sources feeding the lake's annual harmful algal blooms. But money alone cannot solve this problem. Funding for pollution reduction programs must have accountability measures in place to ensure the funds lead to measurable clean water outcomes.

The governments of Ohio, Michigan, and Ontario can still meet the broader goal of reducing agricultural pollution by 40 percent by 2025. But it's going to take swift action, long-sighted investments, and real accountability for both agriculture and government. The health of Lake Erie and the millions who rely on it is at stake.

## IN MEMORIAM

# Lee Botts

**As we were completing this issue of Watermarks, we received news that Lee Botts, our founder and a force in creating and nurturing the Great Lakes environmental movement, passed away on October 5th at age 91 in Oak Park, Illinois.**

Lee was a leader without precedent in the modern movement to protect the Great Lakes. She founded the Lake Michigan Federation, the predecessor to the Alliance for the Great Lakes, in 1970. She was director of the Great Lakes Basin Commission under President Carter and



vital champion of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. She was instrumental in pursuing numerous laws and regulations that protect the lakes, including the

successful 1970s effort to ban phosphates in detergent, a major pollutant of our waterways. She also helped found the Indiana Dunes Environmental Learning Center in 1997, providing youth outdoor education experiences. Her voice for the lakes was larger than life and will be missed.

To read more about Lee's legacy, visit [www.greatlakes.org/LeeBotts](http://www.greatlakes.org/LeeBotts).

# Plastics Quiz: Great Lakes Edition

Plastic pollution in the Great Lakes is a growing problem. Put your knowledge to the test with this quiz!



1

**In 2018, what percentage of items collected by Adopt-a-Beach volunteers are made partially or fully of plastic?**

- a) 12%
- b) 56%
- c) 87%
- d) 98%

2

**Which Great Lake has the highest average concentration of microplastics at 230,000 particles per square kilometer?**

- a) Lake Superior
- b) Lake Huron
- c) Lake Michigan
- d) Lake Erie
- e) Lake Ontario

3

**At what size is plastic considered a "micro" plastic?**

- a) 5 mm or less
- b) 1 mm or less
- c) Over 1 cm, but under 3 cm
- d) Between 3 cm and 5 cm

4

**What is the most common form of microplastics found in Great Lakes tributaries?**

- a) Fragments of larger plastic items
- b) Fragments of larger foam items
- c) Plastic fibers
- d) Plastic microbeads

5

**What is a risk posed by plastic pollution to wildlife in the Great Lakes?**

- a) Exposure to toxic chemicals when ingested
- b) Loss of nutrition from ingestion instead of natural food sources
- c) Entanglement
- d) All of the above

6

**Which beverages have been found to contain microplastics?**

- a) Tap water
- b) Bottled water
- c) Beer
- d) All of the above

7

**What Great Lakes state has banned single-use plastic shopping bags?**

- a) New York
- b) Illinois
- c) Michigan
- d) Minnesota

8

**How can individuals help reduce plastic pollution in the Great Lakes?**

- a) Join an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup
- b) Switch to reusable items like shopping bags, water bottles, and to-go mugs
- c) Take the Alliance's Great Lakes Plastic-Free Pledge
- d) All of the above

1. C), 2. E), 3. A), 4. C), 5. D), 6. D), 7. A), 8. D)

**Answer Key**

**How'd you do? Like this quiz, plastic pollution is tricky! Learn more about this problem, and how we're working to combat it, at [www.greatlakes.org/plastic](http://www.greatlakes.org/plastic)**





## IN BRIEF



**Thanks to the generosity of people like you** who care about the lakes, the Clean Lake Benefit, our 2nd annual Cleveland fundraiser, raised more than \$11,000. Special thanks to event sponsors

Great Lakes Brewing, Tucker Ellis LLP, and the Port of Cleveland. Each dollar helps protect the Great Lakes for the people who drink from them, swim in their waters, and sit by their shores. It's not too late to donate: [www.GreatLakes.org/CLB2019](http://www.GreatLakes.org/CLB2019)



**From Duluth, Minnesota to Rochester, New York, September Adopt-a-Beach** brought together

thousands of people who love the Great Lakes. The cleanups, part of the International Coastal Cleanup, took place September 21st on all 5 Great Lakes and in all eight Great Lakes states. While we're still collecting final data, you can check out some special moments at [www.GreatLakesAdopt.org](http://www.GreatLakesAdopt.org)

## SAVE THE DATE

**Adopt-a-Beach Spring Kick-Off & 50th Anniversary of Earth Day**  
**April 2020**  
Regional

**Great Blue Benefit**  
**June 4, 2020**  
Theater on the Lake  
2401 N. Lake Shore Drive  
Chicago, IL

**September Adopt-a-Beach**  
**September 19, 2020**  
Regional

# H.O.M.E.S. FOR THE HOLIDAYS – 3 Ways to Give This Holiday Season

What's the best part of the holidays?  
HOMES sweet HOMES.

**T**his holiday season, give the gift of fresh, clean, and safe water by supporting the Alliance for the Great Lakes in our mission to protect the Great Lakes. Here are three ways you can give.

### ■ Giving Tuesday – December 3

Celebrated on the Tuesday following Thanksgiving and following Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday kicks off the holiday charitable giving season.

Be part of this global day of giving. Keep an eye out on our social media, in your email in-box, and on our website. We have a big goal of beating last year's record of \$27,775 donated in support of our work to protect the Great Lakes.

### ■ Give a gift of a donation for the lakes (instead of another sweater)

What do you get for the person who has everything? The last thing they need is another ugly sweater that they'll never wear. Instead, set up a donation in honor of your loved ones at [donate.greatlakes.org](http://donate.greatlakes.org). This tax-deductible gift won't get lost in the back of their closet, it will help protect the Great Lakes.

### ■ Think of the Great Lakes in Your End-of-Year Giving

Sometimes it seems like we only hear bad news about the Great Lakes. But our team here at the Alliance for the Great Lakes is focused each day on finding solutions to protect our region's most precious resource. Help protect the Great Lakes today with a tax-deductible gift at [donate.greatlakes.org](http://donate.greatlakes.org).

## TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

**We'd love your feedback about our Watermarks newsletter. We're also happy to answer your questions about pressing Great Lakes issues. Email us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org).**



ALLIANCE for the  
**GREAT LAKES**

150 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 700, Chicago, IL 60601

312-939-0838 alliance@greatlakes.org

www.greatlakes.org

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Great Lakes photos by Lloyd DeGrane

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works to protect the Great Lakes  
for today and tomorrow.

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