

# Watermarks

Marking 20 Years  
of Adopt-a-Beach  
Data Collection:  
What have we learned?





## Securing A Sustainable Future for The Great Lakes



At the Alliance for the Great Lakes, optimism is one of our values. We believe there are always solutions to the challenges facing our lakes. In fact, our work is driven by a specific goal: to protect the lakes and ensure that communities can depend on them. The Great Lakes have profound social, economic, and environmental significance, not only to us and our region but to the nation and the world. While considerable progress has been made to protect and restore the Great Lakes, much work remains to be done. In this issue of Watermarks, we share our top priorities for the Biden administration and Congress and share the incredible work we are doing in partnership with volunteers across the lakes.

Our federal policy priorities identify the five best opportunities we see for Congress and federal agencies to take action for the lakes. Our leaders must continue their enthusiasm in recent years to make sure every Great Lakes community has safe, clean, and affordable water, prevent the spread of invasive species, and maintain momentum in protecting the communities hardest hit by pollution.

This year, we also see two special opportunities to address critical Great Lakes problems. First, legislation known as the Farm Bill is passed only once every five years. 2023 presents an excellent opportunity to modernize federal agriculture programs, so they incentivize farmers to produce clean water as part of their harvests instead of the pollution that is fouling our lakes. And as Alliance volunteers show, plastic pollution continues to flow into the lakes. Congress must intervene to reduce the proliferation of plastic and give our Great Lakes communities a fighting chance at stemming the tide of microplastics in our water.

In 2023, We have our sights set on changing the systems necessary to restore and protect our waters. The Alliance is here to protect the health of the lakes that we all rely on for our well-being today and into the future. Expectations should be high for federal leadership on the lakes, and we've been encouraged by recent bipartisan enthusiasm for rebuilding safe and clean water infrastructure and restoring our lakes from past damage. We will ensure that our decision-makers follow through on their pledges in an action-packed year ahead! With your ongoing commitment and support, we are inspired with great expectations of a healthy Great Lakes future for all.

In gratitude,

Joel Brammeier, President & CEO

## 2023 FEDERAL POLICY PRIORITIES



### Water Infrastructure

Increase water infrastructure funding, prioritize funding for communities most in need



### Agriculture

Pass a Farm Bill that prioritizes clean water



### Plastic Pollution

Pass legislation to stop plastic pollution



### Invasive Species

Protect the Great Lakes from aquatic invasive species



### Great Lakes Restoration

Update and fund Great Lakes restoration programs

## Top Five Great Lakes Federal Policy Priorities for 2023

**Significant progress has been made in protecting and restoring the Great Lakes. But much more needs to be done.** Too many Great Lakers experience polluted water, whether it is lead-tainted water coming from taps in homes or algal blooms fouling beaches. Invasive species threaten the lakes, and plastic pollutes our beaches and drinking water.

In our 2023 federal policy priorities, we've identified the top five opportunities for Congress and federal agencies to address these challenges. Many of these priorities are familiar. Congress and the administration must keep up the momentum generated over the past few years to fix our water infrastructure, stop invasive species, and support on-the-ground restoration projects.

Equity and justice are embedded throughout these policy priorities. Equity and justice must be considered at every step of the federal decision-making process to ensure that all Great Lakers have access to safe, clean, affordable water. Federal water programs must

prioritize low-income communities and communities of color, where the pollution burden often hits hardest. Repairing the long-term harm from environmental injustices isn't a one-off action. Instead, Congress and the administration must ensure that community voices are at the table and listened to from the beginning of all decision-making.

This year, we have two new priority areas focused on opportunities we've identified for the federal government to push forward new approaches to long-standing problems. First is the Farm Bill, which only happens every five years and sets national agriculture and food policy. We see an opportunity to improve federal agriculture subsidy programs to make sure farmers produce clean water, not pollution, along with their crops. Second, concern about plastic pollution continues to grow, and Congress can act to limit plastic pollution by reducing it at the source and not once it is a problem on our beaches and in our communities.

## TAKE ACTION!

Tell Congress to protect the Great Lakes & clean water. Visit [www.greatlakes.org/takeaction](http://www.greatlakes.org/takeaction) to send a letter to your members of Congress in Washington.





# Plastic and The Great Lakes

**Adopt-a-Beach volunteers are on the front lines of keeping litter off our beaches and out of the Great Lakes. But did you know that these volunteers are also citizen scientists?**

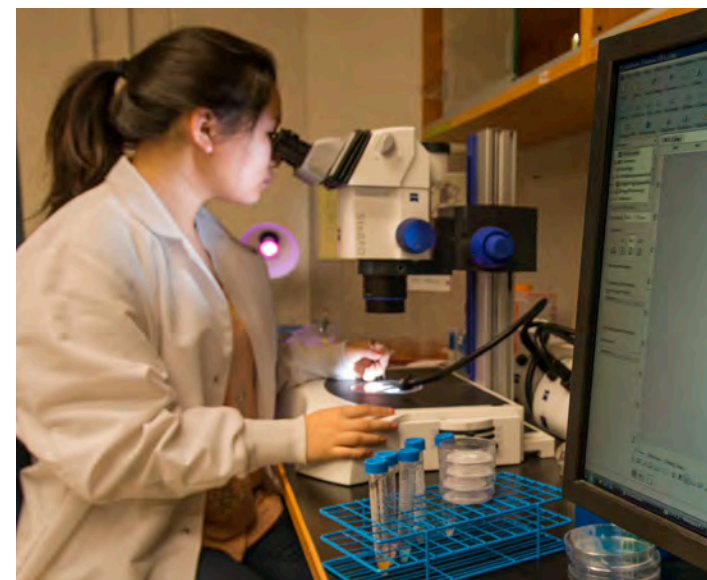
This year marks twenty years of data collection by Adopt-a-Beach volunteers. The Alliance for the Great Lakes created its online Great Lakes litter database in 2003 and added data collection to the Adopt-a-Beach program.

## Filling a Data Gap, Identifying Troubling Trends

While scientists have been studying plastic pollution in the ocean for decades, there is much less research about plastic pollution in the Great Lakes. Adopt-a-Beach data collection is one way our Great Lakes community is beginning to fill that gap. The litter data collected by Adopt-a-Beach volunteers spans beaches and shorelines across all five Great Lakes. No lab or individual researcher could collect this extensive data set on their own. Volunteers have steadily created this dataset with each cleanup over the past twenty years.

Volunteers use a datasheet at every beach cleanup to tally each item they pick up. The event's team leader tallies up all the data collected at the event and enters it into our online system. Counting each cigarette butt, bottle cap, or piece of tiny trash can sometimes feel a bit silly on the beach. But the power of all that information in one place is impressive, and it is showing us some troubling trends.

So, what do the data tell us? It's not a pretty picture. Roughly 85% of the litter picked up at cleanups is made entirely or partially of plastic. Most of the litter picked up by volunteers



falls into the category of "tiny trash," which are pieces 5 millimeters or less. These are pieces of larger items that have broken down over time. Food-related trash, such as plastic bottles, plastic cutlery, and takeout containers, is about 25% of the litter picked up by volunteers.



## A Clear and Present Danger

While beach litter is a serious concern, it is just the most visible part of a bigger problem. Sun, waves, and other environmental factors break down plastic left on the beach or other places into smaller and smaller pieces. And microfibers from our clothes or plastic packaging from detergent packs wash down the drain into our waterways. These microplastics are often invisible but are dangerous to wildlife, which mistake them for food.

Plastic has been found in Great Lakes fish dating back to the 1950s. That means, for nearly seven decades, there have been microplastics in the lakes, which are a drinking water source for about 40 million people. Today, researchers from the Rochester Institute of Technology estimate that over 22 million pounds of plastic enter the Great Lakes annually. And University of Toronto researchers calculated that the amount of microplastics in the surface water of the Great Lakes is estimated at 1.2 million particles/km<sup>2</sup>. This is higher than plastic concentrations in the widely publicized Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Microplastics have been found in drinking water, bottled water, and beer. And it's estimated that we each ingest about a credit card-sized amount of plastic each week. Much remains to be learned about the impacts of plastic on human health, but the early picture is concerning.

## Plastic Producers Must Take Responsibility

Adopt-a-Beach volunteers do a great job keeping plastic out of our lakes and educating their communities about the plastic pollution problem. But beach cleanups alone can't solve the magnitude of the Great Lakes' plastic problem. A more systemic solution is required.

Currently, most efforts to stop plastic pollution put the responsibility on the last person who uses the plastic, such as recycling. But expecting end users to bear the burden of managing plastic pollution isn't effective. For instance, only a fraction of plastic produced each year can be recycled, leaving the remainder to end up in landfills or as litter that lands in our waterways. This leaves the disposal burden – and significant costs - on individuals, small business owners, and local governments.

The alternative is to require plastic producers to be responsible for their products through their lifecycle, called extended producer responsibility. The concept is not new. Many European countries have such laws. And California recently passed legislation bringing the concept to the United States. These laws reduce or eliminate the most problematic plastics like styrofoam, require plastic manufacturers to pay for disposal, or eventually change their practices to produce less plastic in the first place.

For the first time, we have included plastic pollution as a top issue in our federal Great Lakes policy agenda. We are urging

Congress to be a leader in curbing plastic pollution and pass legislation that:

- Makes plastic producers responsible for reduction of waste
- Reduces the federal government's use of single-use plastics
- Funds additional research on the public health impact of plastics

## How you can help

Solving our Great Lakes plastic pollution problem will take all of us. Here are several ways you can help.

### Refuse single-use plastics.

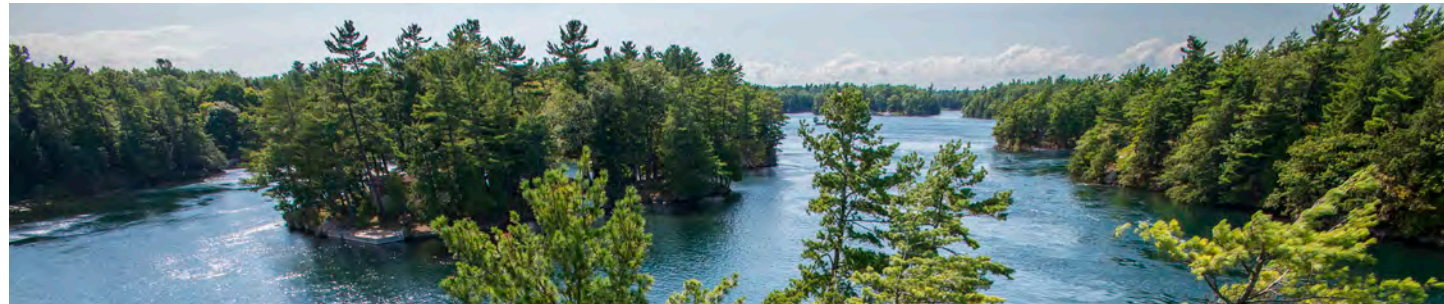
The best way to prevent plastic pollution from getting into the lakes is to stop using it in the first place.

**Your voice makes a difference.** Visit our action center – [www.greatlakes.org/takeaction](http://www.greatlakes.org/takeaction) – to send a letter to your members of Congress, urging them to adopt extended producer responsibility legislation.

**Join a beach cleanup.** Adopt-a-Beach volunteers are on the frontlines of keeping plastic pollution out of the Great Lakes. It's fun, easy, and an excellent way for your family, community group, or business to give back to the lakes. Learn more at [www.greatlakes.org/adopt](http://www.greatlakes.org/adopt)







## Planned Gifts Through the Lee Botts Strategic Fund Create a Lasting Impact for the Lakes



Lee Botts, Lake Michigan Federation Founder, and a Champion of the Great Lakes Movement

Years ago, the Alliance for the Great Lakes created the Lee Botts Endowment, named after our founder, who was a force of nature in creating, leading, and nurturing the Great Lakes environmental movement. Her legacy across the Great Lakes and the now-named Lee Botts Strategic Fund continues to sustain our work and the

lakes themselves. For that, and for so much more, we are all deeply indebted and thankful that Lee chose to share so much of herself with the Great Lakes. Thanks to several generous six- and seven-figure gifts, the Fund has grown from less than \$100,000 at its inception to more than \$5 million in 2022.

Paul Botts, Lee's son and executive director of the Chicago-based Wetlands Initiative, shared, "The Alliance's growth in reach and impact is exactly what my mother most hoped for from the very beginning; seeing the long-term possibilities even when things were difficult in the moment was one of her gifts. She'd be delighted to see that the organization now has a growing strategic reserve fund."

### Philanthropy for the Future

Donna Latham and Nick Longo recently chose to include the Alliance for the Great Lakes in their estate plans. Nick was involved with the Alliance in the 1970s when it was known as the Lake Michigan Federation. The organization "helped drive my early environmental interests, so it was only natural to look to the Alliance for the Great Lakes as part of our estate planning to pay it forward to future

generations of environmental leaders," Nick shared with us. He and his wife now split their time between Chicago and Houston but look forward to returning to Chicago when Nick retires and volunteering with the Alliance.

### Planned Giving Today

Estate gifts are a continuation of your legacy. Regardless of the size of your estate, you can make an impact by giving a gift to an organization you care about. The Lee Botts Strategic Fund provides a trusted option for estate giving to benefit the Great Lakes. Our Board of Directors governs the Fund to provide annual support for the Alliance's programs while growing the base to ensure the funds last in perpetuity.

Including the Alliance for the Great Lakes in estate plans allows you to enjoy the benefits of a gift to charity while making a powerful statement about your love for the Great Lakes. It allows us to fulfill our mission – to protect, conserve, and restore the Great Lakes, ensuring healthy water in the lakes and in our communities for all generations of people and wildlife. Planned gifts build a foundation for the future of our work to protect the Great Lakes.

### Planned giving options include:

- Name the Alliance for the Great Lakes as a beneficiary in a will or living trust
- Make a gift of cash or appreciated securities to establish a charitable gift annuity with the Alliance for the Great Lakes
- Create a charitable remainder trust or charitable lead trust and name the Alliance for the Great Lakes as the beneficiary
- Name the Alliance for the Great Lakes as the beneficiary of a paid life insurance policy or a retirement account
- Transfer gifts of stocks, bonds, and mutual funds

For questions about the Lee Botts Legacy Society, how to leave a gift to the Alliance for the Great Lakes in your will, trust, or other estate plan, or to let us know you have already included the Alliance in your plans, contact Genevieve Fletcher, Individual Giving Manager at (312) 445-9736 or [gletcher@greatlakes.org](mailto:gletcher@greatlakes.org). We encourage you to contact a financial advisor and/or attorney for recommendations for your specific situation.

## IN BRIEF

### New Report Examines Costs to Meet Water Quality Goals in the Western Basin of Lake Erie

Harmful algal blooms plague western Lake Erie each summer. Nutrient pollution, specifically phosphorous, flowing off agricultural lands is the largest unchecked source of pollution driving these massive algal blooms.



In February, the Alliance for the Great Lakes released a new study examining efforts by Ohio and Michigan to reduce phosphorous pollution runoff from agricultural lands. In short, the study found that bold action is needed to meaningfully reduce western Lake Erie's harmful algal bloom problem.

To learn more and to read the full report, visit [www.greatlakes.org/WLEBreport](http://www.greatlakes.org/WLEBreport).



### Have you tuned into our podcast?

Our Lakes Chat podcast features guest appearances and deep dives into Great Lakes issues.

Over 14 episodes, we have covered everything from plastic pollution to invasive carp and water affordability. Our guests include staff experts from our team at the Alliance for the Great Lakes, community members, and researchers studying the lakes. It is a great listen during your commute, gym session, dog walk, or while working at your desk.

Learn more at [www.greatlakes.org/lakeschat](http://www.greatlakes.org/lakeschat)

**SAVE THE DATE** Visit [www.greatlakes.org/events](http://www.greatlakes.org/events) to learn more.

### Adopt-a-Beach Spring Kick-Off Team Leader Training Sessions:

Thursday, March 30th at 1 pm Eastern/noon Central

Tuesday, April 4th at 7 pm Eastern/6 pm Central

### Spring Kick-Off

Friday, April 21, 2023 – Sunday, April 23, 2023

### Great Blue Benefit

Thursday June 22nd, 2023

### September Adopt-a-Beach

Saturday, September 23, 2023



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## TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

We would love to hear your feedback about our Watermarks newsletter. We are also happy to answer your questions about pressing Great Lakes issues.

Email us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org)





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Photos in this issue by Lloyd Degrane  
Plastics and the Great Lakes Story - Volunteers photo by Ondrea Brussee (Team Leader and Alliance Ambassador)

**The Alliance for the Great Lakes works across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.**

