



Watermarks

**Steady Currents:
Charting a Future
for the Great Lakes**

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I firmly believe in the power of the long view. Great Lakes problems may get attention in a crisis, but often result from years of accumulated neglect and bad decisions. Righting the ship likewise requires patience and steady work until — one day — the breakthrough happens.

In a monumental victory this past July, we celebrated the signing of the Brandon Road Project Partnership Agreement.

This milestone, born from decades of advocacy and collaboration, is the most important action ever to safeguard our Great Lakes from invasive carp. With the final agreement signed by Illinois, Michigan, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, we are ready to break ground by 2025.

Through more than 20 years of advocacy for the creation and funding of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, we've supported restoration of habitats, cleanup of toxic water, and more. Today we are proud to be launching a \$6 million project to bring those benefits to underserved places in the Great Lakes.

Sparked largely by the Toledo drinking water crisis of 2014, the Alliance stood up a comprehensive agriculture and water program. Today we are deploying the most significant farm pollution monitoring network in the region in southeast Michigan's Lake Erie watershed.

And earlier this year, we published a report on 20 years of shoreline litter in the Great Lakes, showing that the vast majority of it is plastic. Now we are pairing that volunteer-led effort with campaigns to make plastic producers responsible for pollution in the Great Lakes states.

This is why we embrace the long view. This is why our science-based, bipartisan and community-driven approach to solving Great Lakes problems is so critical. There may be no quick fixes, but our permanent commitment to the Great Lakes means we are always at the table, pushing for solutions that last.

Thank you for your steadfast support and partnership. Your contributions, whether for one year or decades, are invaluable in making our Great Lakes remain a thriving, vital resource for all.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joel Brammeier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Joel Brammeier, President & CEO

Invasive Carp Barrier Set to Begin Construction

This summer we celebrated a historic win for the Great Lakes. The Brandon Road project — a series of barriers on the Des Plaines River to stop silver and bighead carp from reaching the Great Lakes — is now set to begin construction. This project is a decade in the making and is a major priority for the Alliance for the Great Lakes.

In July, the state of Illinois and the state of Michigan signed a final project partnership agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to get shovels in the ground as soon as January 2025.

Invasive carp have already wreaked havoc on the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, out-competing native fish for food and injuring people who recreate on the rivers. By using a series of protective measures designed to stop the carp, the Brandon Road project will act as the choke point to prevent them from reaching Lake Michigan.

These fish threaten the economic health of the Great Lakes' \$7 billion commercial and sport fishing industry, its



\$16 billion recreational boating industry, and the entire Great Lakes ecosystem.

This victory wouldn't have happened without a decade-plus of work by the Alliance funded by contributions of individual supporters, foundations, and businesses. Looking back, the steady drumbeat of phone calls and emails to elected officials kept this issue front and center and ensured that every step was taken successfully.

The Alliance continues to keep up the pressure to ensure the project moves to construction without further delays. And we are asking everyone to join us in celebrating this historic win for the lakes!



Ensuring Environmental Justice Communities are Free from Flooding and Sewage

Central to our work is the belief that fresh, healthy, and clean water is an essential resource and right for all life. But flooding, sewage overflows, and legacy pollution problems plague many predominantly low-income communities and communities of color in low-lying areas of southern Lake Michigan, tied to years of government underinvestment in infrastructure. These problems, exacerbated by climate change, are environmental injustices.

The Alliance is partnering with community organizations in the southern Lake Michigan region to stop sewage backups and flooding in homes and businesses.

Supported by a grant from the Walder Foundation, the Alliance is collaborating

with members of Calumet Connect Partnership, the Illinois Water Justice Coalition, and other partners to ensure new stormwater and wastewater funding in Chicago reaches communities most in need. As part of a landmark civil rights agreement with the federal government, the city has announced major new commitments to invest in stormwater and wastewater infrastructure on Chicago's south side.

This presents an opportunity for the Alliance and our partners to work closely with local agencies to target investment where it's most needed and ensure funding decisions are transparent.

Working with our partners, we will identify communities most in need and bring city departments and community

representatives to agreement on where to improve sewage and flood control systems.

In addition, we're launching a new \$6 million program to ensure the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative restores water and nature in environmental justice communities in Indiana and Illinois along southern Lake Michigan. Supported by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Alliance will fund environmental protection and restoration projects that reduce pollution and restore lands and waters in historically disinvested areas. This re-grant program will provide funding to community-based organizations and connected groups who can make sure everyone in the Great Lakes region benefits from restoration.



15 Years of Transformative Progress: The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

A Vision Realized

Born from a vision conceived 15 years ago, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) is one of history's most comprehensive environmental restoration efforts. Since inception, the program has funded over 7,563 individual projects, channeling \$3.7 billion into critical efforts such as cleaning up some of the most toxic sites in the region, habitat restoration, pollution reduction, and the prevention of invasive species. This initiative has not only revitalized ecosystems but also significantly boosted regional economies, generating a \$3 return for every federal dollar spent.

In 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act brought an additional \$1 billion to the GLRI, accelerating the cleanup of toxic hotspots known as Areas of Concern. For example, GLRI funding has been crucial in addressing the legacy of industrial pollution in Ohio's Cuyahoga River, which was classified as an Area of Concern in 1987. The river's condition has significantly improved, with ongoing efforts focusing on the restoration of wetlands and eroded shorelines. Similarly, in Duluth, Minnesota, GLRI funds have been instrumental in repairing the Lakewalk along Lake Superior, which sustained tens of millions of dollars in storm damage. This project not only restored public access but also enhanced climate resiliency and safety along the coastline.

Moreover, the GLRI has played a pivotal role in addressing pollution in Michigan's Manistique River, where contamination from toxic sediment had long plagued the area. In 2020, GLRI-supported initiatives began the removal of over 50,000 cubic yards of PCB-laden sediment, marking a significant step toward restoring the river's health. These examples underscore the GLRI's critical role in addressing environmental challenges that might otherwise remain unresolved.

Charting the Path Forward

As the GLRI marks its 15th year, the stakes are high as Congress considers bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the program. The proposed extension seeks to secure \$500 million annually from 2027 to 2031. This reauthorization has garnered robust support, reflecting a shared recognition of the Great Lakes' vital role in our environmental and economic well-being.

On May 1, 2024, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee unanimously approved the reauthorization bill, setting the stage for full Senate passage. In the House, the bill enjoys bipartisan support from 31 cosponsors, thanks to the dedicated advocacy of lawmakers and environmental groups alike.

Evolving to Meet New Challenges

As we look to the future, the GLRI must adapt to emerging threats. The Alliance for the Great Lakes, in collaboration with the Healing Our Waters–Great Lakes Coalition, has proposed critical updates to the GLRI Action Plan. These recommendations emphasize the need for enhanced climate change resilience and greater attention to underserved communities.

The draft Action Plan IV, guiding GLRI funding from 2025 to 2029, reflects these priorities. It integrates climate projections into project design and implementation, ensuring that restoration efforts are robust against future climate impacts. Additionally, the draft plan, which EPA will finalize this fall, emphasizes meaningful engagement with underserved communities, making it more likely that restoration benefits are equitably distributed.

The Road Ahead

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is more than a series of projects; it is a promise to future generations. It is a commitment to restoring the health and vitality of the Great Lakes, fostering environmental justice, and building resilience in the face of climate change. Reauthorizing and funding the GLRI is crucial, but so is updating its strategies to address the next generation of environmental threats. This means securing financial support and ensuring that the initiative remains innovative, inclusive, and effective.

The GLRI stands at a pivotal moment. The decisions made this year will shape the future of the Great Lakes for decades to come. It is a moment for all of us — citizens, policymakers, scientists, and advocates — to reaffirm our commitment to this critical work. Let us advocate for GLRI's reauthorization, push for its continued funding, and support the evolution of its strategies to meet new challenges. Together, we can ensure that the Great Lakes remain a thriving, vital resource for all.

Fighting Plastic Pollution in the Great Lakes

We all love and depend on clean water. Unfortunately, plastic is polluting our waterways — in the Great Lakes and around the world.

Researchers estimate that over 22 million pounds of plastic enter the Great Lakes every year. And plastic never really goes away. Instead, it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces known as microplastics. Researchers have found stunningly high amounts of tiny plastic pieces in all five Great Lakes, which provide drinking water for 40 million people. They've found microplastics in Great Lakes fish, drinking water, bottled water, and beer.

These plastics are making their way into human bodies. A growing body of research is identifying the health impacts and costs caused by plastic.

Plastic within the Great Lakes ecosystem also has a large impact on wildlife. A University of Toronto study found that 90% of Great Lakes water samples taken from the last 10 years contain microplastic levels that are “unsafe for wildlife.”

Manufacturing plastic is also a problem. The petrochemical facilities that produce plastics also have a toxic impact on surrounding communities. They are predominately located in low-income communities and communities of color that often already bear disproportionate pollution burdens from other sources.

Plastic pollution is a large and systemic problem, but the good news is we're drawing attention to it, and we have solutions.

Thanks to the Adopt-a-Beach data our volunteers collected, we made a huge splash in the media this spring with our report showing that 86% of Great Lakes litter is plastic.



Our report appeared on ABC World News Tonight the front page of the Chicago Tribune, and in other outlets across the region.

We also released a new Plastic Free Great Lakes Toolkit, a blueprint to advocate for plastic pollution solutions in your community. It includes background about plastic pollution, policies that work, and tools to help you build support for change. Find it here: <https://greatlakes.org/plastic-free>

Great Lakes states are making progress as well. In the last year, Illinois passed laws that increase access to water refill stations, ban small plastic toiletry bottles in hotel rooms, and end state purchasing of foam foodware. This summer, Minnesota passed an Extended Producer Responsibility law that holds packaging manufacturers accountable for the waste they produce.

Extended Producer Responsibility laws should be expanded to more states and passed federally. That's why the Alliance is working with advocates and legislators to develop a shared plastic reduction agenda for all Great Lakes states. It includes policies that reduce single-use plastics, filter out plastic microfibers released by clothing in the wash, and ultimately Extended Producer Responsibility laws.

IN BRIEF

Make the Great Lakes and clean water part of the election-year conversation.

Download our nonpartisan **2024 Voter Toolkit** at greatlakes.org/VoterToolkit and learn how to make a difference this election season.



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



The Alliance for the Great Lakes is a nonpartisan nonprofit working across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.

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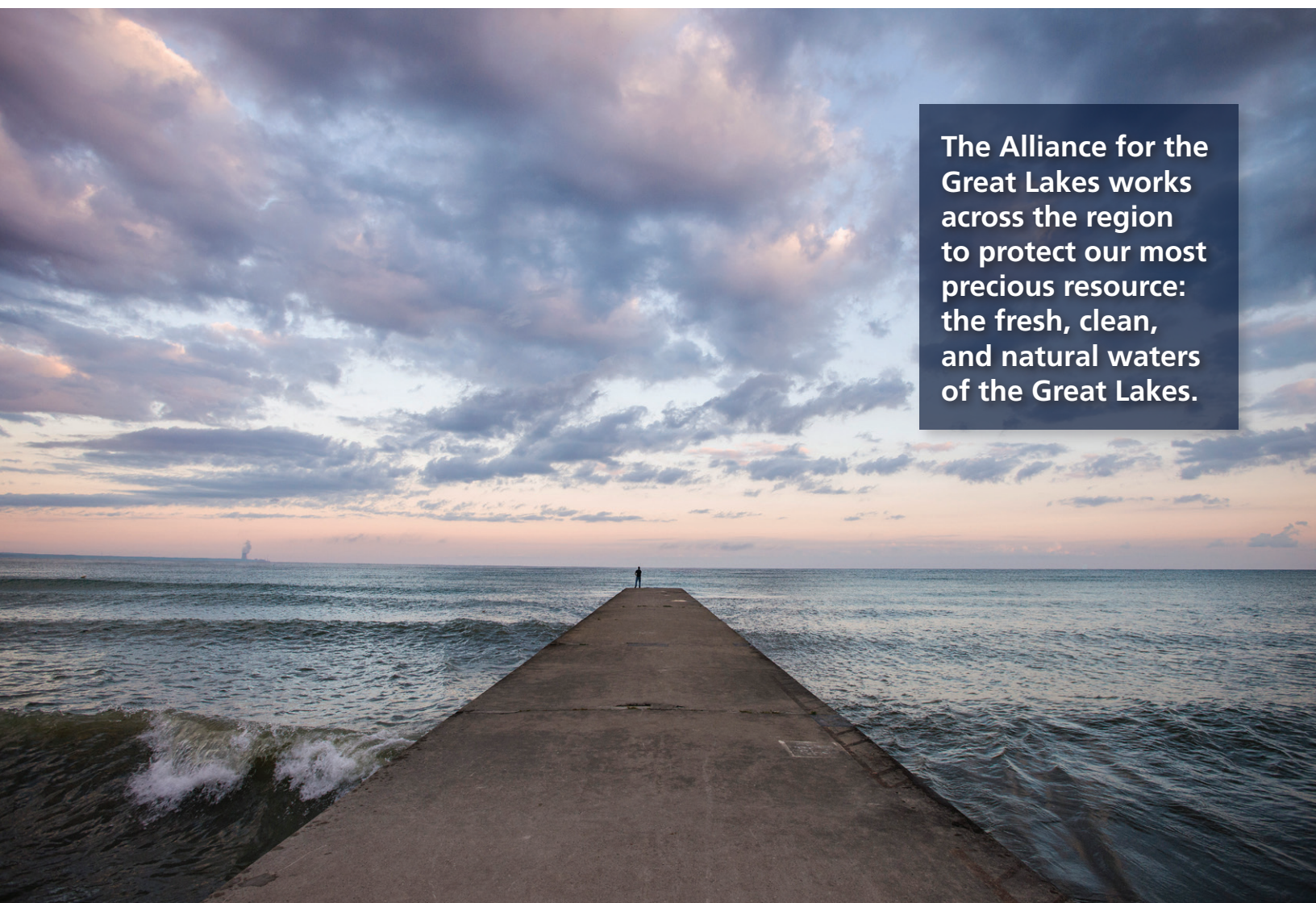
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The Alliance for the Great Lakes works across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.