



# Watermarks



## Protecting What Protects Us

How communities, volunteers, and advocates are stepping up for the Great Lakes.

## A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO



# What the Lakes Ask of Us

The Great Lakes give us so much. And they ask something of us, too.

They ask for vigilance, care, and the willingness to stand up when the waters that sustain us are put at risk.

This year, Congress rejected steep funding cuts to Great Lakes, clean water and science programs requested by the White House and protected investments that keep our lakes clean and our communities strong. It happened because people like you across the basin spoke up, called their representatives, showed up in meetings, and refused to let the Great Lakes become an afterthought.

That's good news, but the picture is more complex. While key funding was preserved, federal Great Lakes leadership and collaboration is reduced. Program pullbacks, staff reductions, and regulatory rollbacks mean fewer people are straining to do critical unfinished work. Plastic pollution persists. Invasive species are knocking. Protecting our drinking water sources remains essential. States are being compelled to step up to fill federal gaps. New pressures on our water, including large-scale data centers, have emerged across the region.

In February, we released our 2026 federal priorities. They lay out a clear path for Congress and other decision-makers in Washington to reaffirm a simple truth we shared during our recent Washington Update webinar. Federal Great Lakes leadership matters.

**It matters to drink water.**

**It matters for science, accountability, and transparency.**

**It matters for the infrastructure that protects our communities and our health.**

**It matters for the economic vitality that depends on the lakes.**

We also released a new Data Center Playbook to support communities navigating proposals for large-scale data center development. These facilities can place significant demands on water and energy systems. Our toolkit provides practical guidance to help local leaders and residents ask informed questions and advocate for responsible planning that protects freshwater resources.

The work ahead requires persistence, partnership, and a steady belief that our lakes are worth protecting, not only for today but for generations to come.

With your support, we will continue to defend federal investments, advance science-based policy and rules, and hold decision-makers accountable.

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**

# Meeting the Moment: Strengthening Leadership Across the Basin

The Great Lakes are entering a defining chapter.

Water use is increasing. Infrastructure is aging. Climate pressures are intensifying. At the same time, public institutions that have historically supported Great Lakes protection are evolving. In moments like this, stewardship cannot stand still.

To meet this moment, the Alliance for the Great Lakes has strengthened its leadership in three interconnected areas: science, strategy, and state-level engagement.

Maria Iturbide-Chang, Director of Water Resources, focuses on ensuring that water quantity, water quality, and long-term availability are treated as one connected system. Groundwater withdrawals, agricultural runoff, industrial siting, and emerging contaminants such as PFAS and microplastics do not operate independently of one another.

“Water doesn’t operate in silos,” Maria explains. “Groundwater, surface water, and nearshore ecosystems are part of one connected system.”

Her work integrates science, research, and policy analysis to help prevent cumulative impacts before they become crises. By anticipating risk and aligning data with decision-making, the Alliance is not only reacting to water emergencies but also working to prevent them.

Megan Cunningham, Vice President for Programs, ensures that science moves beyond reports and into real-world impact. She oversees research, policy development, movement-building, and government affairs, connecting community experience with regional and federal engagement.

“The improvements we’ve seen in the Great Lakes didn’t happen by accident,” Megan says. “They happened through strong science, smart policy, and sustained collaboration.”

Her role bridges local realities and broader governance, ensuring that analysis informs advocacy and that advocacy translates into durable protections.

Andrea Densham, Director of Regional Government Affairs, focuses on strengthening state and binational partnerships across the basin. As policy opportunities emerge at the state level, she works to advance legislation, funding, and regulatory protections that safeguard clean water.

“We have strong relationships across the region,” Andrea notes. “That gives us the opportunity to

move smart policy quickly from one state to another and build shared momentum.”

Her work also supports partners in more challenging political environments, helping defend hard-won protections and build long-term capacity.

**“The improvements we’ve seen in the Great Lakes didn’t happen by accident. They happened through smart policy and sustained collaboration.”**

**— Megan Cunningham, Vice President for Programs**

Together, these roles reflect a deliberate strategy. Science informs policy. Policy strengthens partnerships. Partnerships build regional power. And regional power protects water.

The Great Lakes have benefited from decades of thoughtful governance and collaboration. Sustaining that progress will require continued vigilance, deeper coordination, and a long view that balances growth, resilience, and protection.



*Left to Right:*  
Maria Iturbide-Chang,  
Megan Cunningham,  
and Andrea Densham



# Federal Priorities and Federal Wins

## Protecting What Protects Us

**The Great Lakes always give back. Drinking water for more than 40 million people. Jobs. Recreation. Identity. A sense of place that runs deeper than shoreline. Every year, we identify the top five opportunities for Congress and the president to protect the lakes we depend on. We bring these federal priorities directly to decision-makers as we advocate year-round in Washington.**

Despite many challenges, this year began with some good news.

In January, Congress rejected steep proposed cuts and instead protected funding for cornerstone Great Lakes programs essential to the health of our lakes and the people who depend on them. This does not happen by chance; it is the result of decades of work to increase the Great Lakes region's influence in the Congress. The Alliance for the Great Lakes, our supporters, and numerous regional partners raised our collective voices to make this win possible.

Among the most important wins was protecting funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. That program continues to drive wetland restoration, toxic cleanup, and invasive species control. Maintaining strong federal appropriations ensures that restoration projects do not stall and that momentum is not lost.

Federal investments in drinking water and wastewater infrastructure were also preserved. Through the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, communities across the basin can continue to replace lead service lines, stop flooding and sewage backups, and protect public health.

These wins reflect something powerful. When people speak up, policy shifts.

But appropriations victories are only one part of the story. The Great Lakes enter 2026 with a reduced federal presence due to program pullbacks and staff reductions. In the months ahead, we will be monitoring the ways federal agencies implement funded programs and use their regulatory and enforcement powers. And we'll continue to collaborate with elected officials and partners from across the region to push for our 2026 federal priorities and the work that must continue.

## Investing in Water Infrastructure

Access to clean, safe drinking water and freedom from flooding and sewage impacts are basic needs that should be affordable to all. Yet communities across the Great Lakes face exposure to lead in drinking water, sewage backups into homes, and chronic flooding.



### Water Infrastructure

**“The Great Lakes region needs at least \$290.3 billion over the next twenty years to fix failing water infrastructure.”**

Current federal investment is insufficient. Long-term, sustained funding is necessary to repair and modernize systems while prioritizing communities that have historically borne the greatest burden of pollution and disinvestment. Water affordability must also be part of the conversation. Access to safe drinking water is foundational, not optional.

## Pass a Farm Bill that Prioritizes Clean Water

Agriculture is essential to the Great Lakes region's economy and culture. It is also a significant contributor to nutrient runoff that fuels harmful algal blooms.



### Agriculture

**“Agriculture is the largest unaddressed source of nonpoint pollution in the Great Lakes region.”**

The upcoming Farm Bill presents a critical opportunity. Strengthening conservation programs, ensuring accountability, and providing farmers with technical support can reduce runoff while sustaining agricultural productivity. Protecting water quality and supporting farmers are not opposing goals. With smart federal policy, they reinforce each other.

## Reducing Plastic Pollution at the Source



### Plastic Pollution

**“Researchers estimate that 22 million pounds of plastic pollution enter the Great Lakes annually.”**

Plastic pollution continues to flow into the Great Lakes at alarming levels. It washes onto beaches. It breaks down into microplastics. It enters food chains and drinking water systems.

Federal action must move upstream. That means reducing the worst plastic pollution at the source including foam food-ware and industrial plastic pellets, holding plastic producers accountable for the waste they create, and monitoring plastic pollution across the Great Lakes.

## Preventing the Spread of Invasive Species

Invasive species cause irreparable harm to ecosystems and cost the region billions of dollars. Once invasive species establish themselves, eradication becomes costly and often impossible. The battle against invasive species is primarily focused on stopping invasive carp from entering the Great Lakes.



### Invasive Species

**“Invasive carp pose a serious threat to the region's \$5.1 billion fishing and \$16 billion recreational boating industries.”**

The construction of the critical Brandon Road invasive carp barrier should continue, and Congress should fund the second phase of the project. Protecting fisheries, local economies, and ecosystems requires vigilance long before a threat reaches open water.

## Renew and Fund Great Lakes Restoration

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is one of the most important tools in the region's toolbox to protect and restore the lakes. The program expires and must be renewed by the end of 2026.



### Great Lakes Restoration

**“For every dollar spent on Great Lakes restoration, an additional three dollars of value is added to the regional economy.”**

# At the Edge of the Water: Two Leaders, One Shoreline, One Shared Responsibility

As the 2026 Adopt-a-Beach season begins, two Team Leaders remind us this work is about more than picking up trash. It is about memory, mentorship, and what we choose to carry forward.



*Patrick G. Rodriguez Sr.*

For Patrick G. Rodriguez Sr., it started with a newspaper article.

A new member of the Indiana Harbor-East Chicago Lions Club brought information about Adopt-a-Beach to a meeting. The club voted to take on an environmental service project and asked Patrick to lead it. He has been organizing cleanups ever since.

That first year came with uncertainty. The group did not know where to stand or what to measure. What steadied them was the Adopt-a-Beach program and guidance from experienced volunteers.

When Lion Carlos Godinez, the member who first suggested the project, passed away from cancer, the club renamed their effort in his honor. The Carlos Godinez Adopt-a-Beach Memorial Cleanup continues to bring people together at the shoreline.

Patrick often points to the teachable moments this work creates, like measuring longshore currents at Jearse Park Beach and discovering how lakefront construction affected water flow.

“Every cleanup is more than picking up trash. It is about educating the public, building friendships, and strengthening our communities,” Patrick says.

Further north at Montrose Beach, Raymund C. Torralba, PhD, began leading cleanups for a different reason. He wanted his students to experience civic engagement firsthand.

At his first cleanup, the amount of plastic and cigarette butts shocked

*Raymund C. Torralba*



*Montrose Beach volunteers*

everyone. What surprised him more was how quickly students took ownership of the space. They were not just collecting litter. They were protecting something.

In 2025 alone, Adopt-a-Beach volunteers removed more than 23,000 pounds of litter from Great Lakes shorelines while collecting data that helps shape conversations about freshwater protection.

“Cleanups might look simple, but they open people’s eyes and remind us that caring for our lakes is work we must keep doing,” Raymund says.

From the outside, a cleanup may look simple: gloves, bags, and a clipboard. But something deeper is happening. Awareness grows. Communities connect. Stewardship takes root.

If you have ever considered becoming a Team Leader, this is your invitation. Gather your students, coworkers, congregation, or friends. Learn your shoreline. Protect it.

The lakes are waiting.

**Learn how to lead an Adopt-a-Beach cleanup or sign up to participate: [greatlakes.org/adopt](https://greatlakes.org/adopt)**



# New data center playbook: Protect water and understand the impact of data center development

Water and energy use from data centers is spiking across the Great Lakes region, which could lead to strain on local water systems, increased prices for ratepayers, and ultimately water shortages, groundwater conflicts, and aquifer contamination.

To help make sense of the impacts, we released a guide for residents, concerned citizens, grassroots organizations, and local leaders seeking clear, accessible information. It describes data center impacts and provides questions and checklists for communities seeking transparency around impacts on water, energy, land use, community health, and the local economy.

The goal is to ensure that, if data centers move forward, they operate in ways that maximize public benefits while minimizing harm to water

resources, community well-being, and ecosystems.

While we know data centers require large amounts of water and energy, there are barriers to understanding their full impact on communities and the Great Lakes. Developers often rely on non-disclosure agreements to keep estimates of water withdrawals, cooling needs, and electricity demand secret, even when communities are being asked to approve projects. Many data centers are not required to measure or publicly report how much water they use when they receive water from local municipal systems. And data centers also increase electricity demand, which in turn raises water use at power plants that rely on cooling water.

These are just some of the impacts described in the playbook, along with the questions necessary to bring



transparency to local data center development.

As Maria Iturbide-Chang, Director of Water Resources, shared when the playbook was released, "The playbook is designed to inform Great Lakes residents about the processes and the potential consequences, identify the right questions to ask at the right moment, and navigate local and regional decision-making processes to ensure that we protect our Great Lakes, its water resources, and the communities that depend on them."

## IN BRIEF

### SAVE THE DATE

**Great Blue Benefit Thursday, June 11, 2026**

6-9 PM | Columbus Yacht Club

Join us for an evening on the water in support of the Great Lakes. The Great Blue Benefit brings together advocates, partners, and community leaders to celebrate progress and power what comes next.

Reserve your spot and learn more at [greatlakes.org/GBB](https://greatlakes.org/GBB)

**Spring Kickoff Weekend April 24-26, 2026**

Cleanup season is here. Volunteers across the Great Lakes will gather to remove litter, collect data, and protect freshwater. Host your own cleanup as a Team Leader or find one near you.

Get started at [adopt.greatlakes.org](https://adopt.greatlakes.org)

### WAYS TO GIVE

Your support fuels restoration, advocacy, and community action across the Great Lakes. Make a one-time gift, become a monthly supporter, explore workplace giving, or include the Alliance in your legacy plans.

Every gift strengthens freshwater protections for more than 40 million people. Give today at [greatlakes.org/donate](https://greatlakes.org/donate)




**TELL US WHAT YOU THINK** Share your feedback, story ideas, or questions about our work protecting the Great Lakes. Email [communications@greatlakes.org](mailto:communications@greatlakes.org)

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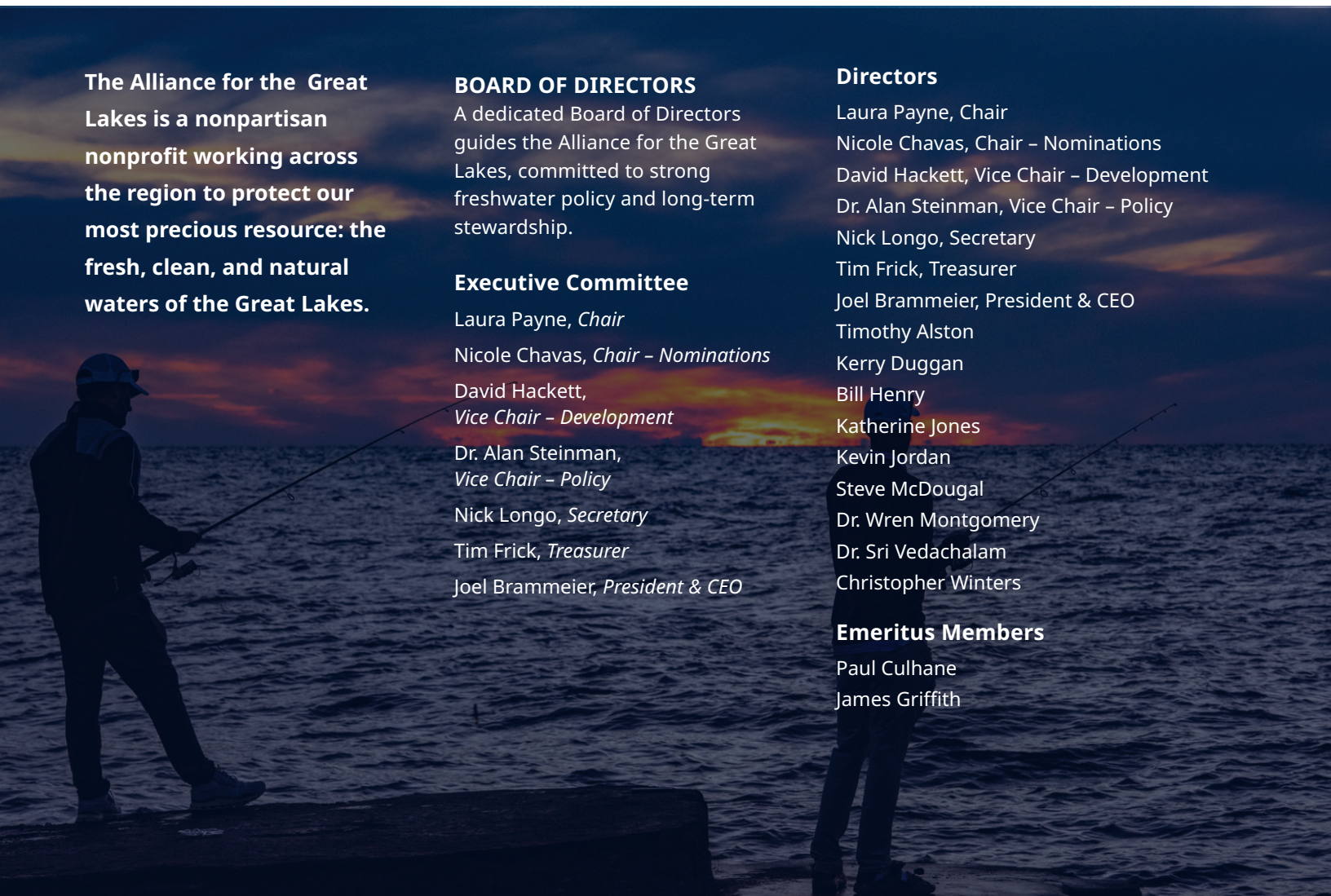
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**The Alliance for the Great Lakes is a nonpartisan nonprofit working across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.**

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