

MAKE THE GREAT LAKES AND CLEAN WATER PART OF THE ELECTION-YEAR CONVERSATION

Right now, you have an opportunity to encourage candidates to stand up for the Great Lakes and hold them accountable, once elected.

Your voice makes a difference – whether you're asking questions at a candidate forum, chiming in on social media, speaking directly with a candidate, or highlighting water issues in a letter to the editor. **People running for elected office pay attention to issues that bubble to the top in all these venues.**

Here's how you can make sure that the Great Lakes and clean water are part of the election-year conversation.



SPEAKING UP:

What questions do you want to ask the candidates?

Asking candidates for any office where they stand on Great Lakes issues raises awareness, highlights the issues, and allows us to hold our elected officials accountable, once they take office. It also helps you and others in the community to understand how candidates would govern, if elected.

Here are some issues where elected officials at all levels of government can make a difference:

- Data centers and other large water users
- Plastic pollution
- Invasive species
- Great Lakes restoration
- Water infrastructure
- Agricultural runoff
- Other local issues

Decide which issues you want to make part of the election-year conversation. Then, think of a few key questions you want to ask the candidates. Here are **some ideas to get you started:**



DATA CENTERS AND OTHER LARGE WATER USERS

Data centers are rapidly expanding across the Great Lakes region. These facilities can require large amounts of water – both directly for cooling and operations, and indirectly via the water used for their power generation needs. Without careful planning, increased water and energy use from data centers could lead to strain on local water systems, increased prices for ratepayers, and, ultimately, water shortages, groundwater conflicts, and aquifer contamination.

We need more transparency and better planning. Many data center developers rely on non-disclosure agreements to keep electricity and water demands secret, even when communities are being asked to approve the projects. Once built, data centers are not required to measure or publicly report how much water they use when they connect to and receive water from local municipal systems. We must ensure that data center projects protect local water resources while providing clear community and economic benefits.

Sample candidate questions:

- What policies would you support to ensure that data centers use water efficiently and do not put a strain on local water supplies?
- What transparency requirements should exist so that the public understands how much water data centers are using and how that affects local resources?
- How should policymakers address the cumulative effect of increased water withdrawals and discharges when multiple data centers are proposed in the same region or watershed?
- Would you support monitoring water quality to protect communities from potentially toxic pollution discharged in data center wastewater?
- Who should pay for the water and wastewater infrastructure data centers need to operate and expand?
- How should state and local governments evaluate whether a public water system or community has sufficient water resources to support large data center development?

If you'd like to dive deeper into questions you should ask data center developers, check out our [Data Center Playbook at greatlakes.org/DataCenterPlaybook](https://greatlakes.org/DataCenterPlaybook).

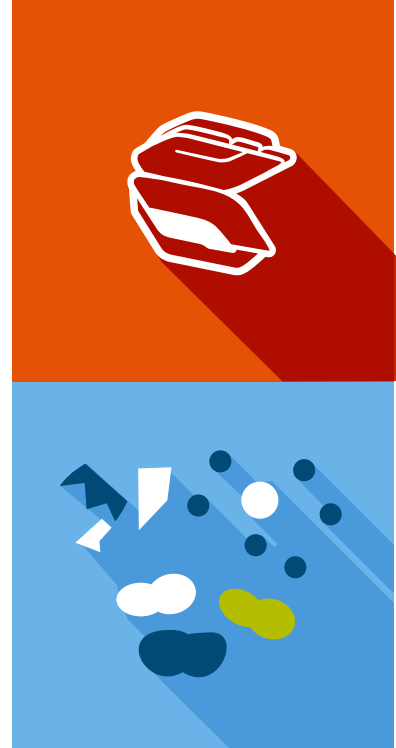
PLASTIC POLLUTION

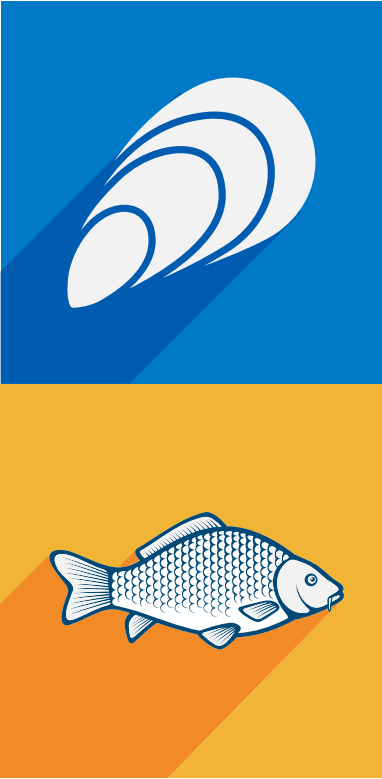
More than 22 million pounds of plastic pollution end up in the Great Lakes every year. And plastic never really goes away. Instead, it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces known as “microplastics.” Researchers have found stunningly high amounts of microplastics in all five Great Lakes. They’ve found microplastics in Great Lakes fish, drinking water, bottled water, and beer. Microplastics have been found in human blood, lungs, stool, and even breast milk.

Substantially reducing plastic pollution will require action from businesses, governments, and manufacturers. Producers should be responsible for the waste they create at all stages of the plastic lifecycle, from production to collection, recycling, and disposal.

Sample candidate questions:

- Do you support legislation that would reduce single-use plastics like foam foodware and plastic shopping bags in our state/community?
- Do you support funding our agencies to monitor our drinking water for microplastics and microfibers?
- Would you support an Extended Producer Responsibility law that would hold manufacturers accountable for the plastic waste they create?
- How would you reduce government purchasing of single-use plastics (for example, changing purchasing practices and using more reusable options)?
- How would you work with communities, businesses, and manufacturers to transition toward fewer plastic-dependent products and less packaging?
- Do you support regulations that allow customers to bring their own refillable containers to grocery stores, beauty care stores, and restaurants?





INVASIVE SPECIES

Invasive species have caused irreparable harm to the Great Lakes ecosystem and have cost the region billions of dollars since the late 1980s. Preventing new invasives from entering is the best way to protect the Great Lakes. We must stop invasive carp by building structural measures that block their path as they make their way up the Illinois River toward Lake Michigan. And we must treat the water in ships' ballast tanks to prevent ballast water from carrying invasive species from overseas to the lakes and from one Great Lake to another.

Sample candidate questions:

- How will you fund programs and agencies that keep aquatic invasive species from establishing and spreading in our waterways?
 - Many Great Lakes science and environmental centers that monitor the lakes for invasive species have faced proposed budget and staff cuts from the federal government. What actions would you take to protect this important research from cuts?
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- Are there new programs or initiatives that you would support to reduce the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species?
 - Studies have shown that ships traveling exclusively on the Great Lakes can spread invasive species in their ballast water. Do you support mandating ballast water treatment for these "Lakers"?

GREAT LAKES RESTORATION

Restoration projects include everything from cleaning up toxic hot spots to restoring wetlands, reducing runoff pollution, protecting native fisheries, and restoring habitat for fish and other wildlife. Funding for these projects can come from federal, state, and local governments. And many government agencies must often work together to make restoration projects happen, from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to your local park district or forest preserve.

Congress established and funded the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) in 2010 to ensure that the Great Lakes would be restored and protected. To date, GLRI has funded more than 8,100 individual projects totaling more than \$4 billion and has greatly improved the quality of life in the region, and restored ecosystems. It is estimated that, for every dollar spent on GLRI projects, an additional three dollars of value is added to the regional economy.

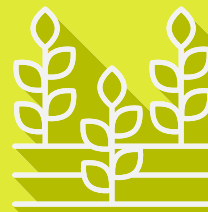
Sample candidate questions:

For federal candidates:

- Would you commit to funding the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) at \$500 million in next year's federal budget?
- Various federal agencies – including, for example, the EPA, Department of the Interior, and Army Corps of Engineers – must work together to ensure that Great Lakes restoration projects move forward, but funding and staffing have been cut significantly. Would you support additional staff or funding to ensure that these projects will be managed well and can move forward?

For all candidates:

- Which restoration projects, such as wetland restoration, toxic sediment cleanup, or habitat restoration, would you prioritize?
- How will you ensure that restoration projects will help the communities where they're located, and are designed to include benefits like reduced community flooding, more green space, and economic development?
- How would you get community input to guide restoration efforts?





WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

No one should be without clean, safe, affordable drinking water in their home. No one should suffer harm from lead service lines. No one should have to worry about sewage backing up into their basement or chronic community flooding that damages homes, businesses, and community gathering places. Yet, communities across the Great Lakes region continue to grapple with antiquated drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater infrastructure.

These harms are compounded by the growing unaffordability of water and sewer services to households, driven in part by the rising costs of maintaining water infrastructure to address such challenges. Burdens fall especially hard on households served by small water utilities in rural areas, communities with a declining customer base, less-wealthy households, and communities with longtime disinvestment rooted in historical redlining or other forms of discrimination. With climate change causing more extreme storms and periods of drought throughout the region, our communities face heightened threats to well-being from inadequate and/or failing water infrastructure.

Sample candidate questions:

- How will you fund much-needed improvements to our drinking water, sewage, and stormwater infrastructure?
- How would you balance the need for increased funding to pay for water infrastructure improvements while also keeping water bills affordable?
- What is your plan to ensure that water infrastructure funding reaches the communities where it is needed most?
- What is your plan to replace lead drinking water pipes?
- How would you involve the community in conversations about water infrastructure needs and improvements?

AGRICULTURAL RUNOFF

Nutrient runoff from agricultural fields fuels excessive algae growth in the Great Lakes, causing harmful algal blooms. These blooms can make water toxic to fish, wildlife, and people; create “dead zones” where fish and other aquatic life can’t survive; increase downstream costs of treating drinking water; harm the regional economy; and prevent recreation on the lakes. In August 2014, a harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie left more than half a million people in Toledo, Ohio, without safe drinking water for nearly three days.

Nitrate pollution from fertilizer and manure also contaminates drinking water, particularly for the people in our region who rely on private wells that draw from groundwater. Growing research shows that long-term exposure to nitrate, even at levels below the 10mg/L federal drinking water standard, may be linked to serious health concerns, including certain cancers and pregnancy complications. Households often bear the cost, needing to drill a new well, install treatment systems, or purchase safe drinking water. These challenges disproportionately affect rural families who are not connected to public water systems.

Reducing nutrient runoff, particularly phosphorus and nitrogen, is critical to protecting the health of the Great Lakes and the communities that depend on them.

Sample candidate questions:

- How would you support funding for conservation programs and other solutions that reduce agricultural runoff into local waterways?
- What specific actions, standards, and/or policies would you support to reduce nutrient runoff from agricultural lands, which pollutes our local waters?
- Billions of dollars have been invested in voluntary programs to reduce agricultural runoff, yet harmful algal blooms persist. What would you do differently to ensure that these investments produce measurable water quality improvements and make better use of taxpayer dollars?
- Do you believe voluntary conservation programs alone are enough to reduce agricultural runoff, or should stronger standards be considered to protect water quality?
- How will you ensure that the public has access to transparent information about whether nutrient pollution in our waters is actually improving?
- Do you support programs that would assist residents in installing new wells or water treatment systems if their drinking water is contaminated with nitrate?





OTHER LOCAL ISSUES

Other local water issues may have a big impact on your community. Perhaps decisions need to be made about permits for mining companies, pipelines, or industrial facilities. There may be local beach access issues or plans to store hazardous waste near local waterways. Make sure to ask candidates about the issue that will have the biggest impact on your community.

MAKE IT LOCAL

While federal and state officeholders and agencies have great influence on the health of the Great Lakes, your local mayor, city council members, and regulators also have a big impact. They make decisions on issues from local drinking water quality to parks and recreation to your water and sewer bills to reducing plastic pollution that ends up in the lakes.

The key to advocating locally is to connect the dots between the issue you care about, the public institution responsible, and the public officeholder who has the most influence on that institution.

Doing some quick detective work by searching your local government webpages will describe which officeholders are responsible for the issues you are concerned about this election. After you have identified the local issue you care about and the candidates who are seeking offices that influence that issue, you can use the tips in this guide to connect with them directly.