ALLIANCE for the GREAT LAKES

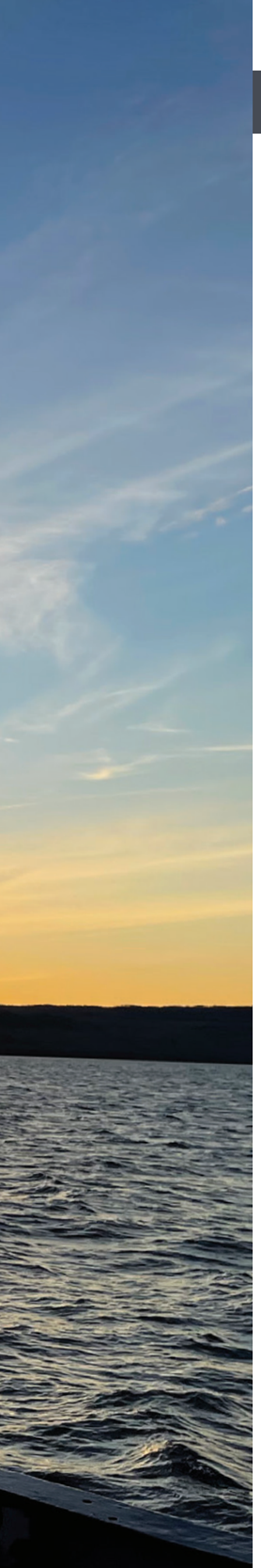
Fall/Winter 2026

Watermarks



The More We Know

Science and community are fundamental to protecting the Great Lakes



A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO



For the Lakes

Dear friends,

The more we know about the Great Lakes, and the more of us who show up to protect them, the stronger our shared future becomes.

You will see it in every story on these pages.

For 35 years, Adopt-a-Beach volunteers have done far more than clean our shorelines. Cleanup by cleanup, piece by piece, they have built one of the most valuable records of plastic pollution in the Great Lakes, a data set now feeding classrooms, research, and policy across the region. That is the power of community and science working hand in hand.

You will see it aboard the vessel Blue Heron, where our team recently joined researchers who are working to understand how the lakes are changing around us. Their work is a reminder that actions taken today to protect our lakes were built on decades of hard work and scientific inquiry.

And you will read about it in our recent progress: a first-of-its-kind Illinois law taking on plastic pellets, new real-time data from our water quality monitoring network in the Lake Erie basin, transparency in how Ohio funds clean water, and the thousands of people who spoke up to stop a permit that would have put Lake Erie at risk.

None of it happens without you.

Our region faces real federal pressure to cut science funding and chill information sharing. Instead, the Alliance is committed to generating actionable data, sharing it transparently and hosting honest discussions about what our Great Lakes need. This fall, we are convening a Science Council for the first time to help address big challenges like plastic pollution and large-scale water use.

When we combine good information with people willing to act, we can both hold the line and ensure that policies evolve to meet tomorrow's challenges rather than look backward.

Thank you for being part of this community. The next chapter of Great Lakes protection will be written by all of us, together.

For the lakes,

Joel Brammeier
President & CEO
Alliance for the Great Lakes

35 Years of Adopt-a-Beach:

A Great Lakes Movement, One Shoreline at a Time

In 1991, a small group of volunteers set out to clean a handful of Great Lakes shorelines as part of the International Coastal Cleanup. Thirty-five years later, that first effort has grown into one of the largest volunteer movements in the region. Today, the Alliance for the Great Lakes' Adopt-a-Beach program reaches all five Great Lakes and all eight Great Lakes states, powered by thousands of volunteers who show up each season with buckets, gloves, and a deep love for these waters.

But the story of Adopt-a-Beach is bigger than what volunteers carry away at the end of a cleanup.

Today, its impact can be measured not only in cleaner shorelines, but in the data volunteers have collected, the policies that data has informed, and the generations of Great Lakes advocates who have grown up alongside the program.



More than a cleanup

Since the Alliance began tracking cleanup data in 2003, Adopt-a-Beach volunteers have removed more than 500,000 pounds of litter—over 10 million individual pieces—from Great Lakes beaches, trails, parks, and marinas.

Behind those numbers are hundreds of thousands of people: families, faith groups, grade schools and high schools, businesses, scuba divers, and even a few professional mermaids.

And this isn't about tidy beaches for a single weekend. Every piece removed is a piece of plastic or trash kept out of the Great Lakes and the surrounding environment. It's also one more piece of information about what is ending up along our shorelines and where that pollution may be coming from.

Adopt-a-Beach volunteers don't just pick up litter. They document it.

Ripples beyond the shoreline

At each cleanup, volunteers record what they find, adding to a Great Lakes litter data set the Alliance has maintained for more than 20 years.

No single lab or researcher could build a data set this large on their own. Thousands of volunteers returning to Great Lakes shorelines year after year have made it possible to see patterns that a single cleanup never could reveal.

Over time, that community-science data has become one of Adopt-a-Beach's most powerful contributions to Great Lakes protection.

In 2024, an analysis of data from more than 14,000 cleanups revealed that 86% of the litter volunteers collect is made partially or fully of plastic. It also found that 40% falls into the "tiny trash" category, fragments smaller than a bottle cap.

The findings drew national attention and added evidence to the growing push to address plastic pollution at its source.

And the data keeps traveling.

In 2025 alone, Adopt-a-Beach data showed up in high school and college classrooms and even an MBA data analytics seminar. It also helped inform testimony before state legislatures, including a Michigan bill to begin monitoring microplastics and an Illinois bill to phase out plastic foam foodware.

As one of the Alliance's policy advisors notes, nearly every plastics conversation in the Great Lakes basin now draws on what these volunteers found on the beach.

A bottle cap counted in Cleveland. A food wrapper recorded in Chicago. A tiny piece of plastic collected along Lake Michigan.

One data point may seem small. Collected across thousands of cleanups and more than two decades, those individual observations tell a much bigger story about plastic pollution in the Great Lakes.

A movement still growing

Thirty-five years after those first volunteers took to the shoreline, the movement hasn't slowed down.

In 2025, more than 10,500 volunteers gave over 24,000 hours across 931 cleanups, removing 541,750 pieces of litter—more than 11 tons—from Great Lakes shorelines.

Some volunteers come for a single cleanup. Others return year after year, lead their own teams, or introduce Adopt-a-Beach to their schools, workplaces, families, and communities.

That's part of what 35 years have built: not simply a cleanup program, but a community of people who understand that protecting the Great Lakes is something they can participate in themselves.

The next 35 years

Thirty-five years in, Adopt-a-Beach is proof of what Great Lakes communities can accomplish together.

But the work isn't finished.

Plastic pollution continues to wash onto Great Lakes shorelines. Tiny fragments are increasingly part of what volunteers find. And communities, researchers, and decision-makers need reliable data to understand how that pollution is changing over time and what can be done about it.

The next chapter of Adopt-a-Beach will depend on the same thing that built its first 35 years: people willing to show up, pay attention, collect the evidence, and act.

Every cleanup is a small act of stewardship. Together, those acts add up to something lasting: cleaner shorelines, better information, smarter policy, and a growing community of people who see themselves as protectors of the Great Lakes.

To the team leaders and volunteers who have carried this program across three and a half decades, thank you.

Here's to the next 35 years, one shoreline at a time.

Ready to be part of the story? *Find or host a cleanup near you at* ***greatlakes.org/adopt-a-beach****.*

Adopt-a-Beach Over the Years

1991

Adopt-a-Beach events held in September

2003

Becomes the most extensive volunteer program ever to collect data on Great Lakes beach litter

2007

Adopt-a-Beach volunteers win beach smoking bans along 30 miles of shoreline in Michigan and Chicago

2012

Scientists begin publishing research on plastic pollution in the Great Lakes using Adopt-a-Beach data

2018

A new toolkit - Plastic-Free Great Lakes: An Advocacy Toolkit to Make a Difference In Your Community launches.

A federal ban on plastic microbeads in personal care products takes effect across the U.S.

2020

All-new Adopt-a-Beach website launches

2024

Analysis reveals that 86% of Great Lakes litter is composed either partially or fully of plastic.

2025

Adopt-a-Beach volunteers remove 541,750 pieces of litter – more than 11 tons – from Great Lakes beaches, trails, parks, and marinas.



Aboard the Blue Heron

A Firsthand Look at Great Lakes Science

The Great Lakes hold 21 percent of the world's fresh surface water and supply drinking water to 40 million people. They are also economic engines, generating billions of dollars in fishing, recreation, and tourism. If the region were its own country, its $6 trillion economy would rank as the third largest in the world. And yet, as the researchers who study these waters will tell you, we still know surprisingly little about them.

This past May, Alliance for the Great Lakes Media Director Don Carr spent three days aboard the Blue Heron, a research vessel owned and operated by the University of Minnesota's Large Lakes Observatory, as it crossed Lake Superior. His goal was simple: to capture the stories of the crew and scientists who make Great Lakes research possible, from the captain and chief mate to the marine technicians and students just beginning their careers.

The science team, led by Professors John Kessler and Tom Weber of the University of Rochester, was there to measure and map methane, a potent greenhouse gas and major contributor to our warming atmosphere, released across all five Great Lakes. The expedition was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, the kind of federal support a growing number of researchers worry may not always be there. One postdoctoral researcher aboard, Max Wilder, had already seen his own project cut.



The Alliance's Don Carr (center) with Professors John Kessler and Tom Weber of the University of Rochester

Across every conversation, the message was consistent: understanding the lakes is the first step to protecting them. This research shapes how we safeguard drinking water, fisheries, and the coastal communities that depend on them.

That is why the Alliance is working to share these voices in Washington. As Director of Federal Affairs Jenny Larsen notes, members of Congress benefit from hearing directly from the scientists doing this work. There is still so much to learn about the Great Lakes. The more we know, the better equipped we are to protect them, and now is the time for Congress to invest in that knowledge.

Want to come aboard? *To see Don's experience and hear more from the crew and scientists of the Blue Heron, watch the full film at* ***greatlakes.org/blueheron****.*

Making Waves

*Read these stories and more at **greatlakes.org/news***

Construction resumes on invasive carp barrier

Construction is moving again on the Brandon Road project, a critical line of defense against invasive carp entering the Great Lakes. After work was abruptly halted in July, the Alliance joined partners across the region in calling for construction to resume. That pressure made a difference, and work is now back underway. The Alliance will continue pushing to keep the project on track and protect the Great Lakes from invasive carp.



Illinois takes on plastic pellets

Illinois is set to become the first Great Lakes state to crack down on industrial plastic pellet spills. With our support, the state legislature in May passed the Plastic Pellets Pollution Control bill (HB 4418) and sent it to Governor Pritzker, who signed it into law this August. The law recognizes these tiny plastic "nurdles" as a pollutant and directs the state EPA to require polluters to keep them out of our waters.

Reducing algal blooms in Lake Erie

To tackle nutrient pollution and harmful algal blooms in the Western Lake Erie Basin, the Alliance teamed up with LimnoTech and Michigan State University to build a high-density monitoring network across five Michigan sub-watersheds. Its 50 sites and 200-plus sensors track rainfall, nutrients, and runoff in near real time, pinpointing where pollution starts so solutions can be aimed where they matter most. As of this spring, real-time data is now available online.

More than $1 million for local restoration

In July, the Alliance launched the Community Partnerships Grant Program for Southern Lake Michigan, making more than $1.1 million available in 2026 for community-led projects across Illinois and Indiana. Funded through a partnership with the U.S. EPA, the program helps communities reduce pollution, restore habitat, and build healthier lands and waters, with grants of up to $300,000.

More transparency for Ohio's water funding

Ohio EPA launched a new public dashboard for its State Revolving Funds, the state's main source of low-interest loans for drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater projects. Long urged by the Alliance, the tool shows which communities receive funding, updated monthly. More transparency helps us understand where investments are going and whether funding is reaching the communities that need it most.



Ohio pumps the brakes on data center pollution

When the Ohio EPA proposed a permit that would have allowed data centers to discharge wastewater into state rivers, streams, and Lake Erie with minimal oversight, the Alliance and its partners pushed back. More than 7,000 public comments poured in, and this summer the agency withdrew the proposal. Data centers will now need site-specific permits, with room for public input.

Ways to Give

greatlakes.org/ways-to-give

Protect the water we all depend on.

Your support powers everything in these pages: cleaner beaches, stronger policy, and science that safeguards the Great Lakes for generations. Explore all the ways to give, from one-time gifts to legacy giving, at ***greatlakes.org/ways-to-give***.

Make your impact go further, all year long.

Already a supporter? Consider upgrading to a monthly gift. Recurring donations give the Great Lakes steady, dependable protection and make a lasting difference with no extra effort on your part. Set it up in minutes at ***greatlakes.org/ways-to-give***.



The view from the cabin of the Blue Heron

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