

GAO
Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-782T](#), a testimony before Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The five Great Lakes, which comprise the largest system of freshwater in the world, are threatened on many environmental fronts. To address the extent of progress made in restoring the Great Lakes Basin, which includes the lakes and surrounding area, GAO (1) identified the federal and state environmental programs operating in the basin and funding devoted to them, (2) evaluated the restoration strategies used and how they are coordinated, and (3) assessed overall environmental progress made in the basin restoration effort.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommended in its April 2003 report that the Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency

- ensure that the Great Lakes National Program Office fulfills its coordination responsibilities and develop an overarching Great Lakes strategy; and
- develop environmental indicators and a monitoring system for the Great Lakes Basin that can be used to measure overall restoration progress.

EPA generally agreed with GAO's conclusions that better planning, coordination, monitoring and the development of indicators are needed, and stated it would provide a formal response to the report recommendations at a later date. As of May 2004, it has not yet provided this response.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-782T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John B. Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

GREAT LAKES

A Comprehensive Strategy and Monitoring System Are Needed To Achieve Restoration Goals

What GAO Found

There are 148 federal and 51 state programs funding environmental restoration activities in the Great Lakes Basin. Most of these programs are nationwide or statewide programs that do not specifically focus on the Great Lakes. However, GAO identified 33 federal Great Lakes specific programs, and 17 additional unique Great Lakes specific programs funded by states. Although Great Lakes funding is not routinely tracked for many of these programs, we identified a total of about \$3.6 billion in basin-specific projects for fiscal years 1992 through 2001.

Several disparate Great Lakes environmental strategies are being used at the binational, federal, and state levels. Currently, these strategies are not coordinated in a way that ensures effective use of limited resources. Without such coordination it is difficult to determine the overall progress of restoration efforts. The Water Quality Act of 1987 charged EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office with the responsibility for coordinating federal actions for improving Great Lakes' water quality; however, the office has not fully exercised this authority to this point.

With available information, current environmental indicators do not allow a comprehensive assessment of restoration progress in the Great Lakes. Current indicators rely on limited quantitative data and subjective judgments to determine whether conditions are improving, such as whether fish are safe to eat. The ultimate success of an ongoing binational effort to develop a set of overall indicators for the Great Lakes is uncertain because it relies on the resources voluntarily provided by several organizations. Further, no date for completing a final list of indicators has been established.

Great Lakes: Largest Body of Freshwater in the World



Sources: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and GAO.