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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-515](#), a report to congressional requesters

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 recommends 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 the Congress, GAO, and the Office of Management and Budget with a formal response to the report recommendations at a later date.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-515.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841, or John Wanska at (312) 220-7628.

GREAT LAKES

An Overall Strategy and Indicators for Measuring Progress Are Needed To Better 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 involve the localized application of national or state environmental initiatives and do not specifically focus on unique basin concerns. However, several programs specifically address environmental conditions in the Great Lakes. GAO identified 33 federal Great Lakes specific programs, and states funded 17 additional unique Great Lakes specific programs. Other governmental, binational, and nongovernmental organizations also fund restoration activities within the basin.

GAO identified several Great Lakes environmental strategies being used at the binational, federal, and state levels. These strategies are not coordinated or unified in a fashion comparable to other large restoration projects such as the South Florida Ecosystem. In an effort to improve coordination, federal and state officials recently published *Great Lakes Strategy 2002*, but this document is largely a description of existing and planned program activities rather than an overarching plan. EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office has coordination authority over many activities but has not fully exercised it to this point.

With available information, it is not possible to comprehensively assess 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.