



The Great Lakes Interagency Task Force and Great Lakes Regional Collaboration

Building on Success

Background

The Great Lakes are a dominant part of the physical landscape and cultural heritage of North America. Shared with Canada and spanning more than 750 miles from west to east, these vast inland freshwater seas have provided water for consumption, transportation, power, recreation, and a host of other uses.

- The Great Lakes hold 20 percent of the world's fresh surface water, have a 10,000 mile coastline, and drain about 200,000 square miles of land.
- The Great Lakes Basin, which is home to 34 million people in the U.S. and Canada, has unique landscape features such as sand dunes, coastal wetlands, 20,000 islands, rocky shorelines, prairies, savannas, and forests.
- The eight Great Lakes States include one-third of all the registered recreational boats in the United States; generate \$18 billion/year in revenue from hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching; make up the world's third largest economy (after the U.S. and Japan), and would comprise the eleventh largest country in the world.

The Great Lakes are sensitive to the effects of a wide range of pollutants. Major stresses on the lakes include toxic and nutrient pollution, invasive species and habitat degradation. Sources of pollution include the runoff of soils and farm chemicals from agricultural lands, waste from cities, discharges from industrial areas, and leachate from disposal sites. The large surface area of the lakes also makes them vulnerable to direct atmospheric pollutants that fall as rain, snow, or dust on the lake surface.

Great Lakes Interagency Task Force

A Great Lakes Interagency Task Force (IATF) was created through an Executive Order in 2004 and tasked with coordinating all facets of federal actions affecting the environmental health of the Great Lakes. The IATF brings together twelve Agency and Cabinet-level departments at the Secretary level (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, State, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Homeland Security, Army, Food and Drug Administration, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, and the Council on Environmental Quality) to provide strategic direction on Federal Great Lakes policies, priorities, and programs. The Executive Order also established a Regional Working Group (RWG) of the IATF which leads federal cooperative on-the-ground actions to protect and restore the Great Lakes.

Great Lakes Regional Collaboration

As directed by the Executive Order, the IATF, in turn, formed a Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC) that brings together the Great Lakes States, local communities, tribes, regional bodies, and other interested parties in the Great Lakes region to develop and carry out the most coordinated and comprehensive Great Lakes protection and restoration strategy ever devised. The collaboration is governed by an Executive Committee with representation from the federal government, states, cities, tribes, and Congress. The IATF and GLRC are also tasked with carrying out the Great Lakes portion of the U.S. Ocean Action Plan.

GLRC Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes

The GLRC released the *Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes* in 2005 after a year-long open and transparent process that involved input from the public, all levels of government, industry, non-governmental organizations, and academia. The Strategy addresses eight of the most significant broad-scale issues facing the Great Lakes, as identified by the Great Lakes Governors at the request of the Great Lakes Congressional Delegation. The Strategy has an unprecedented level of bipartisan support from the Great Lakes Congressional Delegation and Great Lakes stakeholders, who remain firmly committed to continuing the GLRC and implementing its Strategy recommendations.

As the federal agencies and partners work together to more fully implement the GLRC Strategy, the IATF and GLRC are the prime mechanisms for coordinating Great Lakes environmental protection and natural resource activities in the United States. This coordination has reduced duplication of agency efforts while delivering Great Lakes environmental restoration and protection programs in a more efficient and effective manner on behalf of all U.S. residents. Regular meetings and dialogue have resulted in an unprecedented degree of communication, cooperation, and coordination of governmental efforts at all levels in the Great Lakes basin.

IATF Implementation of Key Strategy Recommendations

Federal implementation of key Strategy recommendations by the IATF has led to some very significant on-the-ground actions to restore and protect the Great Lakes. The IATF supported the GLRC Strategy by committing to 48 near-term actions to restore the Great Lakes. Of these, 37 actions have been completed and the majority of the rest are on track towards completion. Some examples of these successful actions include:

- Member agencies project that the federal share (one-half) of the 200,000 acres of protected/restored wetlands goal will be met by the end of 2008.
- IATF members' Great Lakes Watershed Restoration Grants Program has provided almost \$3 million in federal funds and leveraged over \$4.5 million in non-federal funds to support 52 restoration projects since 2005.
- IATF has been proactive on new, emerging issues for which there may not be effective existing programs:
 - ◆ In 2008, organized a meeting of experts on Type E botulism to identify potential management actions for the control of this threat which has caused widespread die-offs of fish and fish-eating birds in the Great Lakes.
 - ◆ IATF's Federal Aquatic Invasive Species Rapid Response subcommittee is coordinating Federal efforts and working with GLRC to respond to aquatic invasive species. A Communication Protocol was developed for coordinating efforts to stop new invaders to the Lakes and to ensure resources and expertise can be deployed to quickly address the problems of new invaders. In 2008, a mock response exercise was held in Lake Erie to test the Communications Protocol.

GLRC Initiatives Developed to Address Strategy Goals

GLRC efforts to further Strategy goals have resulted in a series of initiatives on toxics, invasive species, beaches, and wetlands. Some of the specific actions of these initiatives have addressed include the following:

- Through public education, pollution prevention, and enhanced surveillance, the Toxic Pollutants Initiative has a series of near-term activities to reduce persistent toxic substances, as well as prevent new toxic threats to the basin.
- The Clean Beaches Initiative promotes the identification and remediation of sources of beach contamination by using beach sanitary surveys and forecasting models.
- The Habitat/Wetlands Initiative is coordinating federal and non-federal partners to protect and restore Great Lakes wetlands. Their 2008 publication, Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Habitat/Wetlands Initiative: A Progress Report and Call to Action, is a guide for using available tools to restore and protect habitat in the Great Lakes. The Report calls on federal and non-federal partners to accelerate habitat restoration and protection activities; and provides uniform definitions of accomplishments to allow more accurate tracking of progress.

Need for Sustained National and Regional Efforts in the Great Lakes Basin

The Great Lakes need sustained support from all quarters to continue to build upon the strong foundations laid down by the IATF and GLRC. Much has been accomplished, but much still remains to be done as stakeholders in the Great Lakes Basin work together to reach the bold goals set forth in the GLRC Strategy. Examples where sustained efforts are needed include:

- Protecting Great Lakes wetlands
- Preventing new invasive species
- Continuing efforts to restore "Areas of Concern"
- Advancing non-point source control measures
- Reducing beach closings
- Continuing to reduce release of toxic chemicals
- Enhancing systems to monitor and understand the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem
- Encouraging sustainable development and green energy and transportation
- Coordinating climate change adaptation activities