

Charter for the *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems*

This Charter establishes a *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems* within the National Water Program administered by the Environmental Protection Agency. The Charter defines the purpose, membership, and objectives of the *Council*.

I. **BACKGROUND**

Throughout the country there are dramatic examples of improvements in the health of rivers, lakes, and streams. Before enactment of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the Potomac River was too dirty to swim in, Lake Erie was dying, and the Cuyahoga River was so polluted it burst into flames. Today, the combined efforts of Federal, State and local governments, the private sector, and the public have brought about dramatic improvements to these waters and thousands of others around the country.

Although evidence of improvement in the Nation's waters is overwhelming, assessments of the condition of the Nation's waters suggest that significant water pollution problems remain and the health of some of the Nation's most critical aquatic ecosystems is at risk. For example:

- States report that 45% of 695,540 assessed river miles and 32% of 30,446 assessed estuary square miles did not meet clean water goals in 2002;
- a recent EPA report on the condition of "wadeable streams" across the country found that 42% of streams are in poor condition with the remainder in fair or good condition; and
- EPA's assessment of the condition of coastal waters describes coastal condition as "fair" on a good/fair/poor scale.

In addition, assessments of some of the Nation's most significant large aquatic ecosystems point to significant water pollution problems. For example, progress in restoring the Chesapeake Bay is slower than expected. In the case of the Great Lakes, the Great Lakes National Program Office (GLNPO) rates the overall health of the lakes at 22.7 in 2007 on a scale of 40. The Gulf of Mexico faces significant challenges related to excessive nutrients, loss of habitat, and harmful algal blooms.

Much of the success in restoring and improving the water quality is the result of Federal, State, and local government efforts to implement core programs authorized in the Clean Water Act throughout the country (e.g. the discharge permit program, the State Revolving Loan Fund program, National Estuary Program, and the wetlands protection program).

After the initial implementation of the core Clean Water Act programs, evidence emerged in the 1980's of serious and complex water quality problems in specific, large aquatic ecosystems. In response to this information, new programs were developed focusing on the needs of specific aquatic ecosystems. The first large aquatic ecosystem protection programs were developed to protect the Chesapeake Bay, the Great Lakes, and the Gulf of Mexico. Each of these three major "place-based" clean water programs has different elements but there are several key features in common:

- EPA plays a leadership role in cooperation with other Federal agencies and States;
- there is a significant financial investment in research and program support; and
- the programs give significant attention to aspects of aquatic ecosystem health not addressed directly in the Clean Water Act (e.g. sediment remediation in the Great Lakes, wetlands restoration in the Chesapeake Bay).

In addition, EPA has worked with State and local governments and non-governmental organizations since 1987 to improve water quality and habitat in 28 coastal estuaries. These watersheds are designated as nationally significant estuaries through the National Estuary Program (NEP). A number of these NEP programs have grown to include major, intergovernmental efforts to protect large aquatic ecosystems (i.e., Long Island Sound, Puget Sound, Columbia River, and San Francisco Bay).

EPA's *Strategic Plan* for 2006 - 2011 describes the work underway to protect large aquatic ecosystems (see Goal 4 of the *Plan*; "*Healthy Communities and Ecosystems*"). The *Plan* provides a narrative description of the ecosystem and the programs in place to address key issues. The *Plan*, however, addresses each area individually and does not identify coordination mechanisms for sharing information or best practices among the ecosystem programs or for managing data related to the measures of progress.

Several major national organizations have recently released reports endorsing the concept of programs to protect critical large aquatic ecosystems and recommending the expansion of this effort. For example, a report by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) calls for "making large aquatic ecosystem restoration a national priority" and "identifying the specific actors, tools, and funding necessary to achieve pollution reduction targets in each area".

The managers of many of the large aquatic ecosystem programs met with national and Regional water program managers on October 22-23, 2007, in St. Louis, Missouri. The purpose of the meeting was to have an initial dialogue on how best to support and enhance efforts to protect these vital water resources. This Charter for the *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems* is in response to the recommendations of this initial meeting of large aquatic ecosystem program managers. More information concerning this meeting is available in a meeting report dated April 2008.

II. PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

The *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems* is chartered to support and promote EPA's implementation of Large Aquatic Ecosystem programs and encourage collaboration within EPA programs and with our external partners, especially states, to help protect and restore large aquatic ecosystems.

The *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems* consists of the EPA director of each of the following large aquatic ecosystem programs, or the designee of the director:

1. the Chesapeake Bay program;
2. the Great Lakes Program Office;
3. the Gulf of Mexico Program Office;
4. the Long Island Sound Program Office;
5. the South Florida Program Office;
6. the Lake Champlain program;
7. the Puget Sound program;
8. the Columbia River program;
9. the San Francisco Bay program; and
10. the Pacific Islands program.

The *Council* shall also include:

- the EPA Deputy Assistant Administrator for Water, who shall chair the *Council*;
- the Directors of the Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds, the Office of Science and Technology, and the Office of Wastewater Management;
- a senior representative of the EPA Office of Research and Development; and
- two EPA Region Water Division Directors serving two year terms.

Members of the *Council* are individually responsible for:

- Participating in the work of the Council through conference calls, email and meetings;
- Providing information to appropriate regional water division directors or national program managers on the activities of the Council; and
- Fostering coordination of large aquatic ecosystem program activities with those of Regional and national core water programs.

The Oceans and Coastal Protection Division within the Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds will support the operations of the *Council* including issue analysis, budgetary and financial support, and national meeting planning and coordination.

III. OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

The *Council of Large Aquatic Ecosystems* has five key objectives:

1. **Strengthen Aquatic Ecosystem Programs;**
2. **Strengthen Core Water Program Implementation;**
3. **Improve Aquatic Ecosystem Program Links to EPA *Strategic Plan* and Budget;**
4. **Improve Aquatic Ecosystem Program Links to EPA Research Plans: and**
5. **Develop and Define New Aquatic Ecosystem Programs.**

Examples of potential activities related to each of these five objectives are described below:

1. **Strengthen Large Aquatic Ecosystem Programs:** Activities to strengthen large aquatic ecosystem programs individually and collectively include:
 - Provide a forum for sharing of information concerning matters of interest to large aquatic ecosystem program managers;
 - Identify successful “best practices” related to protection and restoration of aquatic ecosystems and disseminate information concerning these practices;
 - Identify opportunities for coordination among EPA programs, with other Federal agencies and with State, Tribal, and local program managers;
 - Develop and promote successful methods of generating non-Federal funds;
 - Develop methods and practices for communicating with the public;
 - Support development of environmental and program measures and data;
 - Explore and promote innovative and collaborative approaches;
 - Identify and evaluate emerging issues common to large aquatic ecosystems (e.g. impacts of a changing climate);
 - Identify and recommend to senior management actions that enhance support for large aquatic ecosystem program approaches nationally; and
 - Coordinate closely with the National Estuary Program on “best practices”.
2. **Strengthen Core Water Program Implementation:** Activities to improve the operation of core water programs and Regional water programs include:
 - Identify priority Headquarters’ actions needed to support large aquatic ecosystem programs (e.g., technical assistance, training, contract needs);
 - Explore greater opportunities to support and advance water quality trading;
 - Identify issues in program guidance that may impede or foster large aquatic ecosystem approaches and address them as needed; and

- Recommend elevation of large aquatic ecosystem issues to the agenda of EPA Office Director/Regional Water Division Director meetings.
3. **Improve Links to EPA *Strategic Plan*, Annual Program Guidance, and Budget:** Activities to strengthen links of the large aquatic ecosystem programs to the EPA *Strategic Plan* and annual budget include:
- Advise the Office of Water on future revision of large aquatic ecosystem elements of the EPA *Strategic Plan*, including measures and targets;
 - Advise the Office of Water on aspects of the EPA budget related to large aquatic ecosystems through the budget development process;
 - Participate in development of annual *National Water Program Guidance*; and
 - Participate in mid-year and end of year assessments of progress.
4. **Improve Links to EPA Research Plans:** Activities to better define the research needed to support large aquatic ecosystem programs include:
- Represent to the EPA Office of Research and Development research related needs and priorities of large aquatic ecosystems;
 - Review and comment on draft Multi-Year research plans for ecosystems;
 - Develop cooperative relationships between large aquatic ecosystem programs and EPA laboratories and research offices; and
 - Promote the prompt sharing of research findings.
5. **Develop and Define New Aquatic Ecosystem Programs:** Activities related to new identification of new large aquatic ecosystem programs include:
- Develop measures and related criteria to support decisions related to creation of new large aquatic ecosystem programs, as appropriate;
 - Advise the Assistant Administrator for Water concerning proposals for the development of new large aquatic ecosystem programs; and
 - support the planning/initiation of new large aquatic ecosystem programs.

IV. AMENDMENTS AND EFFECTIVE DATE

This Charter may be amended as needed to reflect changing needs and conditions by the Assistant Administrator for Water in consultation with the members of the *Council*.

This charter is effective upon signature of the AA for Water.



Benjamin Grumbles
Assistant Administrator for Water



Date: