

## GREAT LAKES

Five takeaways from the recent Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus meeting, including climate-change adaptation strategies and a ‘moon shot’ goal of cleaning up all ‘Areas of Concern’ by decade’s end

### 1 MORE RAIN COMING, MORE ADAPTATION PLANS NEEDED

When a “billion dollar disaster” hits the Great Lakes region, a drought or severe storm is almost always the cause.

Don Wuebbles’ message to legislators: Expect the frequency of potentially high-cost events to increase over the rest of this century, as the amount of precipitation in the region increases by 10 percent and temperatures rise by more than 5 degrees Fahrenheit (based on a “low scenario” of climate change along with a baseline of temperatures from the late 20th century).

“Our choice is whether to adapt proactively or respond to the consequences of what happens when there’s a disaster,” Wuebbles, a professor of atmospheric science at the University of Illinois, said to legislators at this year’s meeting of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus.

According to Wuebbles, too many toxic sites (landfills, coal ash storage ponds and industrial facilities) currently sit too close to the lakes, when considering a future with more extreme rainfall, a greater chance of flooding and higher lake levels.

He also suggested that policymakers re-examine zoning and planning standards along their coastlines, invest in nature-based shoreline resilience (for example, the restoration of wetlands and an increased use of vegetation), and upgrade their water infrastructures.

“To minimize suffering [from climate change], what we have to do is really get into heavy mitigation and adaptation,” he said.

### 2 NUTRIENT POLLUTION PROBLEM MAY WORSEN IN FUTURE

A warmer, wetter Great Lakes region also could lead to a spread of harmful algal blooms, a problem that is concentrated now in the Western Lake Erie Basin. “As the other lakes warm, it’s likely to be an increasing issue across the [basin],” Wuebbles said.

Runoff from agricultural land is a prime contributor to this pollution problem, and to date, the response from state and federal governments has largely been to incentivize the adoption of new conservation practices or pay to keep certain land

out of production. (See page 5 for examples of state programs.)

“I wish I could tell you that we’re making huge progress, and that I could give you a time frame by which we think the blooms will be out of the lakes,” Chris Korelski, director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Great Lakes National Program Office, said at the GLLC meeting.

“We’re nowhere near that.” Without more progress, he said, pressure will mount for “a regulation of the agriculture community to a much greater extent than you’re seeing today.”

In her presentation to legislators, Molly Flanagan, chief operating officer and vice president of programs at the Alliance for the Great Lakes, noted that upstream pollution in Ohio costs an average Toledo family of five close to an extra \$100 on their water bill every year.

### 3 A CLEANUP OF ALL TOXIC HOT SPOTS IS NOW IN SIGHT

Between now and the end of this decade, Korelski envisions full or near completion of what he said would be perhaps the greatest achievement in Great Lakes restoration — a cleanup of the 31 Areas of Concern on the U.S. side of the border.

First identified by the U.S. and Canadian governments in the 1980s, AOCs dot the entire Great Lakes coastline. They are a legacy of heavy industrial activity from the early- to mid-20th century, when little or no government regulations were in place to limit what could be dumped into the waters of the Great Lakes basin.

“You have hundreds of millions of cubic yards of contaminated sediments that were left behind,” Korelski said.

As a result, the region has toxic hot spots where water quality is low, and waterfronts are degraded and unusable for recreation.

Cleaning up a single AOC can cost hundreds of millions of dollars, and between 1987 and 2010, only a single one of these areas was delisted. Progress has accelerated with the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (which began in 2010), and last year’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law allocates an additional \$1 billion for Great Lakes restoration. Most of that money will go to AOC cleanup.

Korelski said his office is targeting to have the environmental work at these sites completed by 2030.

“It is a moonshot, but I am very optimistic that we can hit [that goal] or get very close to it,” he said.

### 4 STATES HAVE HISTORIC CHANCE TO UPGRADE WATER SYSTEMS

Flanagan said the recent Bipartisan Infrastructure Law also gives states

the chance to begin addressing an outdated water infrastructure.

Remove lead pipes from drinking water systems. Stop sewer overflows into waterways. Prevent community flooding.

That is the task for states as they prepare to use the new federal dollars.

Flanagan urged lawmakers at the GLLC meeting to get this money to under-resourced communities, which sometimes struggle to meet the necessary federal or state cost-shares for water projects.

Grants and loan principal forgiveness are two ways to help disadvantaged communities overcome funding obstacles, Flanagan said. She also suggested that lawmakers enact state bans on residential water shutoffs and establish permanent low-income water assistance programs.

### 5 A CALL FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION ON INVASIVE SPECIES

The Alliance for the Great Lakes and other groups are calling for congressional action that would have the federal government fully fund the construction phase of the Brandon Road project in Illinois.

Minus such a new law, though, a non-federal match of some kind will be needed to get this invasive-species control project to the finish line. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is leading the work, but the federal agency’s projects require non-federal sponsors.

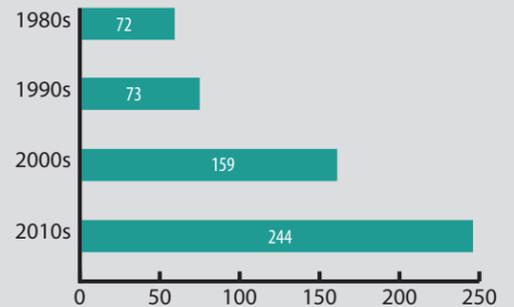
Right now, the cost-share for Brandon Road is 80 percent (federal) and 20 percent (non-federal sponsor). Current congressional proposals call for a change to 90-10. Even that change could leave Illinois, the non-federal sponsor, with costs approaching \$100 million.

“We just don’t have that kind of money in a reserve vault, so it will take legislative cooperation — maybe not just in Illinois, but maybe by collaborating and coordinating with the other Great Lakes states,” Illinois Department of Natural Resources Director Colleen Callahan said at the GLLC meeting.

Michigan already has contributed some money to initial phases of the project, which calls for the construction of a new electric barrier and other controls at the Brandon Road Lock and Dam. The goal is to keep invasive carp and other species from moving from the Mississippi River System into the Great Lakes.

Article written by Tim Anderson, who can be reached at [tanderson@csg.org](mailto:tanderson@csg.org). CSG Midwest provides staff support to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus, a binational, bipartisan group of state and provincial legislators. Illinois Rep. Robyn Gabel serves as caucus chair; Minnesota Rep. Jennifer Schultz is the vice chair.

### TRACKING THE RISE IN BILLION-DOLLAR WEATHER AND CLIMATE DISASTERS: # OF SUCH EVENTS, BY DECADE, IN 11-STATE MIDWEST\*



\* These are events where the damages/costs exceeded \$1 billion (inflation adjusted to allow for apt comparison of costs/damages in each decade).

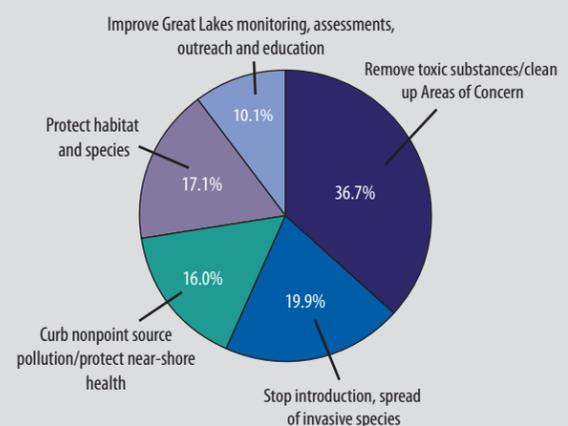
Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

### 10 U.S. STATES ESTIMATED TO HAVE HIGHEST NUMBER OF LEAD SERVICE LINES IN THEIR DRINKING WATER SYSTEMS

State	Estimated # of lead lines
Illinois	679,000
Ohio	650,000
Michigan	460,000
New York	360,000
New Jersey	350,000
Missouri	330,000
Wisconsin	330,000
Indiana	290,000
Texas	270,000
Minnesota	260,000

Source: Natural Resources Defense Council

### HOW MONEY FROM GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE WAS USED IN 2021



Source: Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

