

# Restoring the Great Lakes, Prioritizing Communities that have Suffered the Greatest Harms

**HOW FEDERAL RESTORATION INVESTMENTS CAN ACHIEVE ECOLOGICAL OUTCOMES, WHILE HELPING THE COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE EXPERIENCED THE MOST POLLUTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL HARM.**

Clean water is a basic need, and we need to do everything we can to ensure that every person has access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water. Unfortunately, many cities and towns continue to live with unsafe drinking water due to pollution, sewage overflows, and other serious threats. Disturbingly, some communities disproportionately bear the brunt of pollution and environmental degradation, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Low-income communities, people of color, and indigenous people are more likely to suffer the serious health impacts of water pollution—from families in cities who suffer lead poisoning due to aging infrastructure to people in rural communities who cannot drink their well water because of toxic PFAS contamination. These disparities have been created in part by policies that have segregated communities, barred access to economic opportunity, and excluded some groups of people from decision making.

These impacts of systemic racism and differing access to power have caused lasting harm for some of our communities and the people who live in them.

These environmental threats are serious. And they need to be addressed now, before they inflict greater harm on people, families, and communities—and before they get more expensive to solve.

The Biden Administration and U.S. Congress have the opportunity to advance solutions to improve the environment, while also protecting historically disadvantaged communities from harm. Elected officials can strengthen programs that protect public drinking water, clean up toxic pollution, and restore iconic waters like the Great Lakes, by prioritizing the needs of the most-polluted communities in programs like the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.





Lake Sturgeon Imprinting Project.

## Great Lakes Restoration Investments Producing Results

Over the past 12 years, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has been producing results for communities across the region. Cleaning up toxic pollution has rid harbors and rivers of cancer-causing pollutants and led to new waterfront development. Restoring wetlands have provided habitat for fish and wildlife and have led to cleaner sources of drinking water and increased outdoor recreation opportunities. Removing old and dangerous dams have opened up fish habitat and increased safety for river recreation. Building rain gardens, green spaces, and urban habitat has reduced neighborhood flooding and provided new spaces to play and congregate. These restoration investments have also led to economic benefits. A 2018 report found that every \$1 invested in Great Lakes restoration produced at least \$3 in increased economic activity. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has provided a raft of benefits to communities across the Great Lakes.

Yet serious threats remain unaddressed in too many communities around the region, underscoring the need for sustained federal investment.

## Restoration Investments Can Help the Most Vulnerable Communities

As the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative enters its second decade, it is necessary to make the program even stronger by focusing on oft-neglected communities. The principle that all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, are treated fairly and involved and benefit from the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies is often referred to as environmental justice. Achieving environmental justice, according to the EPA, occurs when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, as well as equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work. The Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition is committed to helping the EPA achieve these goals, and we believe that the EPA can, and should, integrate environmental justice into the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

Refinements to the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative can accelerate restoration progress, while ensuring that communities most impacted by pollution benefit from restoration investments. This can be accomplished by ensuring greater public participation—especially those most impacted by pollution—to provide feedback on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, including which projects are chosen, how investments are prioritized, and who does the work.

To that end, the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition has the following recommendations to help integrate environmental justice into the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

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## Incorporate Environmental Justice throughout the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

The EPA's Environmental Justice strategic plan has already made a commitment to incorporate environmental justice into everything they do. A basic principle of environmental justice holds that communities that have borne the brunt of the ill-effects of pollution be at the center of decisions when solutions are devised and implemented. This requires robust community engagement targeted at those very communities. The EPA and other federal agencies implementing the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative should:

- Provide additional Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grants to communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-income communities, recognizing ecosystem restoration can also revitalize our communities and our economies at the same time.
- Restore previously used language in Requests for Applications that prioritized environmental justice, community engagement, and contracting with disadvantaged business enterprises.
- Coordinate with the Environmental Justice Interagency Working Group on ways to expand community engagement. Consistent efforts must be made to continually reach out to more communities for input on projects, impacts, and desired results.
- Start the process for public engagement on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan IV earlier and prioritize community outreach and engagement with communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-income communities.
- Reconvene the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration to revisit the guiding “Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes,” and evaluate the progress that has been made, the work that is left to be done, and the need to address the climate crisis and environmental justice.

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## Ensure Representative Community Engagement Is a Requirement for Area of Concern Public Advisory Councils

Areas of Concern have been identified as the most severely polluted places around the Great Lakes—so-called toxic hot-spots—and have been given a plurality of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding. Given that pollution tends to be concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color, these Areas of Concern provide an opportunity to address environmental injustices.

Unfortunately, there is currently no community representation standard for the Public Advisory Councils—the entities charged with increasing public awareness, representing public priorities, and ensuring project implementation. And, public engagement is inconsistent across the region. Project input will be most reliable when advisory councils represent—demographically and socioeconomically—the people who live in impacted

communities. The individuals at the federal and state levels who implement and support the Area of Concern program should:

- Set standards for community representation and inclusion on Public Advisory Councils that include demographic and socioeconomic indicators.
- Hold councils accountable that fail to meet these standards.
- Enlist Public Advisory Councils earlier in the decision-making process to ensure robust community engagement to ensure projects are meeting community needs.
- Provide funding to Public Advisory Councils to implement these changes.

The Healing Our Waters–Great Lakes Coalition looks forward to working with the EPA, members of Congress, and Great Lakes partners to advance these common-sense solutions. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has made progress restoring the environment, while providing an economic boost for the region. However, there is more work to do before the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is engaging, benefiting, and responding to the needs of all communities in our region. The good news is that we can work together to bring environmental justice principles into the fabric and outcomes of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative so that all communities—especially the most impacted—can benefit from this program.



The diverse community of the Plaster Creek watershed near Grand Rapids, Mich., has come together to protect a common shared resource.



Since 2004, the Healing Our Waters – Great Lakes Coalition has been harnessing the collective power of more than 160 groups representing millions of people, whose common goal is to restore and protect the Great Lakes. Learn more at [healthylakes.org](http://healthylakes.org). Follow us on Twitter @[@healthylakes](https://twitter.com/healthylakes).

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