

TESTIMONY OF HOWARD A. LEARNER
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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
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I am Howard Learner, the Executive Director of the Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC), which is the Midwest's leading environmental legal advocacy and eco-business innovation organization. ELPC has staff and offices in seven Midwest states and, here, in Washington D.C. We have worked for many years to protect the Great Lakes and were very engaged with many colleagues and public officials to establish the successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative before and then during the Obama administration.

Congratulations to Congresswoman McCollum for now chairing this important Subcommittee. ELPC recognizes and commends the Appropriations Committee and this Subcommittee for its strong bipartisan support for funding the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative over the past decade.

I will be making three related points today:

First, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is vitally important and successful. This is a model federal program providing great benefits, and it is working well.

Second, the Appropriations Committee should provide continued annual funding for this program at least at the authorized level of \$300 million.

Third, the Appropriations Committee should work to increase funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to \$475 million annually, which was the funding level during the FY 2010 for this successful program. As you understand, the Great Lakes faces increased challenges from harmful algae blooms in western Lake Erie, Green Bay, Lake Superior and other places, and the impacts of climate change realities are creating much more stress on Great Lakes infrastructure and the ecosystem.



The Great Lakes are a global gem and contain 21% of the planet's fresh water supply. 42 million people rely on the Great Lakes for safe drinking water supplies. The Great Lakes provide a rich aquatic habitat for many species. The Great Lakes support a \$7 billion annual fishing industry, and Great Lakes recreation draws millions of tourists who boost the economies of shoreline communities. In short, the Great Lakes are where many millions of people live, work and play.

Turning to my first point: The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is a common-sense program that is working well. It supports shoreline and wetlands protection projects, keeping out invasive species, and reducing harmful algae blooms. Congress' understanding of the effectiveness of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is reflected in the bipartisan support to twice reject President Trump's proposed budget cuts for this successful program, and, instead, restore the full current authorized funding of \$300 million annually.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has funded and supported more than 4,000 projects across the Great Lakes states to:

- Improve water quality for safe drinking water supplies, fisheries and aquatic habitats.
- Protect shorelines and restore wetlands.
- Protect and restore native habitats and species.
- Help prevent and control invasive species.
- Clean up toxic sediments on lake bottoms.
- Reduce nutrient runoff that contributes to harmful algal blooms.

For more than 25 years, there were many plans to restore the Great Lakes, but they were constrained by the lack of significant federal funding. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative was a breakthrough. This program was initially planned for \$500 million of annual federal funding and a vision that it would add to existing programs. Over the past ten years, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has achieved strong results and sustained funding.

For example, in Minnesota, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding has protected 10,000 acres of coastal wetlands along Lake Superior, and has supported clean up the contaminated St. Louis River, an "Area of Concern" near Duluth, which is enjoyed by boaters and fisherman. In Michigan, projects have ranged from the *Kids Creek Restoration Project*, an impaired stream near the Grand Traverse Bay, to projects to clean up and green Detroit's Rouge River and park areas. In Illinois, according to the Healing Our Waters coalition, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has invested \$267 million in 193 projects to restore habitat, fight invasive species, clean up toxic pollution, and reduce polluted runoff. Formerly industrialized sites like Northerly Island are being reclaimed as green spaces. Ravine ecosystems in the Chicago suburbs are being restored to filter runoff before it enters Lake Michigan. Beaches are being restored for swimming. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is a program that is working very well on the ground and on the waters.

Turning to my second point: This Committee and the full House have consistently voted to appropriate \$300 million of funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and to reject the President's proposals to zero out or cut 90% of the program funding. This Committee should again appropriate **at least** \$300 million for this successful program for this fiscal year and, hopefully, reach to a higher level of funding.

Turning to my third point: This Subcommittee and the full House Appropriations Committee should work to **increase** funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to \$475 million annually. The needs are great and increased funding is justified as harmful algae blooms in western Lake Erie, Green Bay, Lake Superior and other shallow water bays, and the impacts of climate change realities, are creating much more stress on Great Lakes infrastructure and the ecosystem.

Last year, the Senate proposed in the Water Resources Development Act to steadily increase funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to \$330 million in FY 2019, \$360 million in FY 2020 and \$390 million in FY 2021. This year and next, the House should seize the opportunity to do more and restore the successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to its initial annual funding level of \$475 million.

The challenges of harmful algae blooms in shallow water bays across the Great Lakes require effective actions and solutions sooner, rather than later. Enforceable regulatory standards are necessary and appropriate to reduce phosphorus and nitrate runoff from CAFOs' manure spreading and fertilizers from corn and soy agricultural operations. Additional funding to incentivize and implement solutions is also necessary and timely.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative supports programs including the Great Lakes Sediment and Nutrient Reduction Program to reduce phosphorous pollution. More needs to be done and accomplished to achieve the results of eliminating or at least significantly reducing harmful algae blooms. The Environmental Law & Policy Center's Great Lakes Science/Policy Confluence Conference on May 1-2, 2018 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the upcoming Confluence Conference on March 28-29, 2019 in Chicago, Illinois, convene leading scientists and policy expert to focus on solutions to reduce harmful algae blooms in the Great Lakes.

Climate change impacts present a growing threat to the Great Lakes, which will be explained in detail in a new report written by leading Midwest-Great Lakes university scientists convened by the Environmental Law & Policy Center. We commissioned leading Midwest scientists to develop this updated comprehensive report, which explains the ways that climate change is harming the lakes themselves, and what these changes mean for public health, infrastructure, fish and wildlife, and the regional economy. Even as the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative invests in shoreline and wetlands restoration projects, green infrastructure to reduce run off, and improvements to stream banks and fish habitat, climate change will continue to impact all of these actions and increase the need for restoration funding and investment.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is a successful program and a model for federal, state and local cooperation. Moving forward, the Environmental Law & Policy Center encourages this Subcommittee and the full Committee and Congress to seize the opportunities to increase funding so that the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative can better achieve its full potential to restore the Great Lakes where we live, work and play.