



GREAT LAKES
ECOREGION NETWORK

Highlights from Great Lakes Ecoregion Network's Report

The Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement at Fifty

2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the first Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (Agreement) between the United States and Canada. Late in 2021, individuals and organizations throughout the Great Lakes region, who have helped shape the Agreement and its implementation over the last five decades, came together to form a new network—the Great Lakes Ecoregion Network (GLEN)—to celebrate 50 years of GLWQA achievements, critique its limitations, and consider actions needed in the next 50 years to safeguard this global treasure.

The two countries can celebrate several Agreement **accomplishments** through incremental progress:

- Reduced direct discharges from industrial and municipal point sources, including successful phosphorus bans from household and commercial detergents
- Identified hundreds of known and potential toxic and hazardous pollutants entering and/or in the Great Lakes and helped to embed criteria for persistent toxic chemicals in domestic law and regulatory systems
- Identified the 43 Areas of Concern and spurred remedial action in both nations
- Drove early work on the role of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) as endocrine disrupters
- Connected scientific findings to policy and programs through consultation, citizen awareness and testimony, and binational coordination
- Helped to develop the basin-wide Great Lakes community, through citizen forums, cross-border networks, agency collaboration, and common visions
- Embraced the Great Lakes as a whole, connected system.

While the Great Lakes are better off than 50 years ago, **the Agreement's essential goals are unfulfilled:**

- The Parties have failed to embrace preventive and precautionary approaches and many other Agreement principles as primary guidance for their strategies and actions. They have also failed to take bold and responsive action at critical moments.
- Domestic regulatory systems are completely inadequate to address nutrient pollution from agricultural sources.
- Commitment to zero discharge and virtual elimination of toxic pollutants is fading or even lost.
- After more than three decades of cleanup effort, 34 of an original 43 Areas of Concern remain: 26 U.S., 12 Canadian, and five shared.
- Physical and biological ecosystem integrity has not received adequate attention, affecting water quality and ecological health.
- Since 1987, the IJC's role as an independent watchdog of Agreement compliance by the Parties has been intentionally diminished by the two countries, and the restructured roles and responsibilities between and among the Parties and the IJC have not resulted in better policies or more effective controls on toxic substances, nutrients, and invasive species.
- The Parties have reduced or eliminated funding that supports public consultation and agencies often do not actively seek or appear to want public comment or involvement. The overall effect is the loss of wisdom, experience, and ownership that authentic consultation can provide.

Continue for GLEN Recommendations...

GLEN Recommendations for the Agreement's Next Fifty Years

Despite previous efforts by the Parties, the Great Lakes continue to be challenged by new and old toxic chemicals, the impacts of excessive nutrients from land use, invasive species, habitat loss, pollution of groundwater that feeds the lakes, and climate change—perhaps the biggest threat to the lakes.

As we look toward the next fifty years, we urge the Parties and the Great Lakes community to consider challenges that need cross-border cooperation, to envision what a stronger management regime might look like, and to identify what the next Agreement needs. This includes:

- To achieve zero discharge, the Parties must adopt a proactive, zero-use strategy and collaborate on shared strategies for radionuclides, pollution from plastics and microplastics, and new emerging toxic chemicals.
- Address cumulative impacts from animal agriculture, such as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).
- Expand the GLWQA to include indigenous nations as Parties who are partners in developing and implementing the GLWQA.
- Establish a new agreement between the U.S./Canada and the region's sovereign indigenous nations on Great Lakes biodiversity that addresses invasive species, habitat loss, and extinction, or expand the existing GLWQA to explicitly include indigenous nations and the biological health of the Great Lakes ecoregion.
- Either establish a new agreement between the U.S./Canada and the region's sovereign nations to address climate resilience and adaptation strategies for the Great Lakes or expand the GLWQA to explicitly include climate response in the Great Lakes ecoregion.
- Create a consistent and integrated framework for measuring and reporting progress against established goals, benchmarks, and timelines, and specific geographical and ecological targets.
- Commit to effective public engagement by establishing an ecoregional advisory structure that engages citizen, environmental, municipal, and indigenous representatives to recommend actions to governments, and acknowledge and act on the Parties' responsibilities to hear from the public about their concerns and opinions.

In an era where democratic institutions are fragile, we cannot take the Agreement for granted. Its future requires forward-looking strategies, clear objectives, mechanisms to drive domestic compliance, and the support of the Parties in committing to and funding and implementing the actions that will safeguard the lakes and ecological integrity. The next Agreement must embrace precautionary and preventive strategies, regeneration, and resilience and build back benchmarks for progress and more mechanisms for accountability and meaningful public involvement.



Great Lakes Ecoregion Network (GLEN) is a collaborative of individuals and environmental nongovernment organizations who are committed to generating momentum to strengthen the restoration and protection of Great Lakes water quality. We invite you to learn more and join us by going to <https://greatlakesecoregionnetwork.weebly.com>. Email: GLWQA50@gmail.com.