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Regional Collaboration: Making the Great Lakes Greater

The Great Lakes are a unique and extraordinary natural resource — a national treasure for both the United States and Canada. Together, the lakes make up one-fifth of the fresh water on the earth's surface. They provide drinking water, food, recreation and transportation to more than 35 million Americans.

But the Great Lakes have faced many serious environmental challenges. Since 1970, much has been done in attempts to restore and protect the lakes. EPA and nine other federal agencies administer some 140 programs that fund and implement environmental programs in the Great Lakes basin. Although there has been significant progress, the work of cleaning up the lakes and preventing further problems has not always been coordinated.

That prompted President Bush, in May 2004, to create a cabinet-level interagency task force and to call for a "regional collaboration of national significance." After extensive discussions, the federal Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, the Council of Great Lakes Governors, the Great Lakes Cities Initiative, Great Lakes tribes and the Great Lakes Congressional Task Force moved to convene a group now known as the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration.

The Collaboration includes the EPA-led federal agency task force, the Great Lakes states, local communities, tribes, non-governmental organizations and other interests in the Great Lakes region. The Collaboration has two components: the conveners — mostly elected local and regional officials — and the issue area strategy teams.

The ambitious first goal of the Collaboration is to create a workable strategy within one year to restore and protect the Great Lakes.



Regional Collaboration

Federal agencies, Great Lakes Governors, Great Lakes Mayors, Great Lakes Tribes, and Members of the Great Lakes States Congressional Delegation together are convening a collaboration to restore and protect the Great Lakes ecosystem.

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President George W. Bush signs the executive order establishing his Great

Conveners meet

The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration was officially launched with the first Conveners Meeting on Dec. 3, 2004, in Chicago. On this day, members of the President's cabinet, the Great Lakes governors, the Great Lakes congressional delegations, mayors, and tribal leaders met and forged an intergovernmental partnership and officially voiced their support for a coordinated strategy to further protect and restore the Great Lakes.

Lakes Interagency Task Force, with former EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt and James Connaughton, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, in the Oval Office, May 18, 2004. The task force brings together ten agency and cabinet officers to provide strategic direction on federal Great Lakes policy, priorities and programs.

About 400 regional leaders and stakeholders attended the Conveners Meeting. Commitment to the Collaboration is expressed in the Great Lakes Declaration while the Framework for the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration defines the process for developing a Great Lakes restoration and protection strategy. Agenda for the ceremonial meeting.

Collaboration partners have rallied around a shared vision of a restored, sustainable Great Lakes ecosystem. This has generated optimism and a spirit of cooperation. While the Collaboration is a U.S. effort, its members will do everything possible to make sure the final plan synchronizes our efforts with those of our Canadian partners.

Issue area strategy teams

Following the Conveners Meeting, the issue area strategy teams began their work. These eight teams were organized using priorities identified by the Council of Great Lakes Governors.

The priorities are:

- Aquatic invasive species
- Habitat conservation and species management
- Near-shore waters and coastal areas
- Areas of concern
- Non-point sources
- Toxic pollutants
- Sound information base and representative indicators
- Sustainability

The teams are made up of subject-matter experts from many diverse backgrounds. There are more than 1,500 people from all levels of government, and non-governmental organizations, working on the specific issues identified as crucial to the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

They are the working bodies responsible for drafting specific action items and recommendations to address the eight issues.

As they focus on the respective conditions and tasks of each issue area, the teams have addressed the following overarching considerations and topics:

- Human health impacts and priorities

- Tribal interests and perspectives
- Research and monitoring

Final report due by end of 2005

In July 2005, the teams filed their first reports, listing key recommendations in all eight issue areas. This is the Collaboration's first step toward putting a plan into action.

Five public meetings have been scheduled during a 60day comment period to gain even more input on the July draft report.

With this valuable public involvement, the teams will revisit their recommendations to ensure they are workable. By the end of 2005, the Collaboration will publish a final comprehensive action plan that will define specific actions to be taken, as well as the resources that can be brought to bear by all Collaboration members.

The goal is to begin implementation of the action plan promptly after its release.

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