

Issue Brief: The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative



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What is the GLRI?

Proposed by President Obama and voted into law by Congress in 2009 and later codified in the Clean Water Act in 2015, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) is a federal program providing unprecedented levels of funding to improve Great Lakes environmental quality. To date, the GLRI has spent over \$4 billion on 8,014 projects and has annual appropriations of nearly \$500 million per year, including \$200 million per year from FY 2022-26 from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). GLRI's funds and projects are managed by an interagency task force led by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The GLRI is guided by "Action Plans" which lay out priorities and goals over five-year increments. GLRI Action Plan IV is currently in development, and will cover 2025-29. The biggest change that Action Plan IV makes is its increased focus on environmental justice.

Congress is currently considering [S.3738, the GLRI Act of 2024](#), a bipartisan bill that would reauthorize the GLRI through 2031 at \$500 million per year.

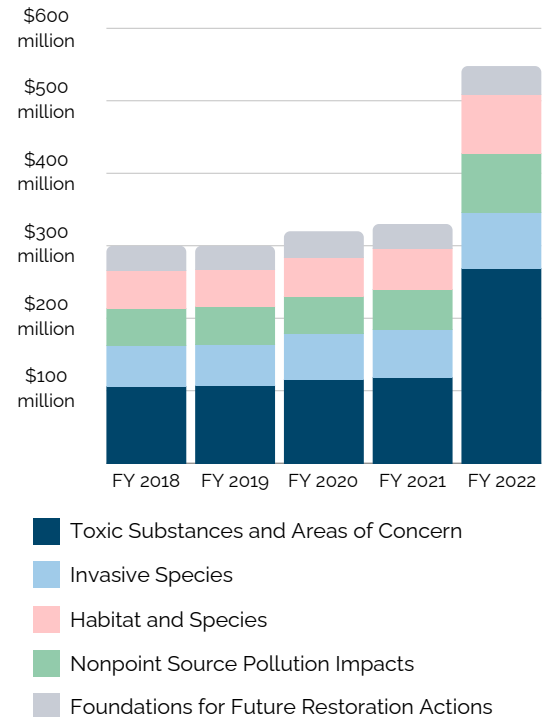
GLRI Focus Areas

The GLRI Action Plans include five Focus Areas to organize restoration work.

Toxic Substances and Areas of Concern: 43 "[Areas of Concern](#)" (AOCs), the most contaminated sites on the Great Lakes, were established in a 1987 amendment to the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. One of the GLRI's objectives is to restore and delist the U.S. AOCs. This is the largest of the Focus Areas, and is a particular focus of IIJA funding (see the graph at right). The GLRI has invested \$1.6 billion through 2022 into cleanup in areas that have long faced difficulties acquiring the resources needed to achieve delisting, including Buffalo River and [Cuyahoga River](#).

The GLRI also seeks to improve information sharing on the risks and benefits of consuming Great Lakes products including fish, plants, and other wildlife. The GLRI supports the Great Lakes Consortium for Fish Consumption Advisories, a collaborative body that shares fish contaminant data and assessment methods while coordinating outreach to consumers, with an emphasis on historically

Funding Breakdown:



Further Reading:

[NEMWI GLRI Briefing](#)

[GLRI In Focus, Congressional Research Service](#)

[GLRI Homepage](#)

[GLRI Economic Impact Study](#)

[GLRI Draft Action Plan IV](#)

disadvantaged communities. The GLRI additionally funds research to increase knowledge of the environmental impact of contaminants on the Great Lakes ecosystem and human health.

Invasive Species: The GLRI seeks to prevent the introduction of new invasive species to the Great Lakes, including the notorious invasive carp. GLRI-funded projects have included installing and maintaining barriers to prevent invasive species from entering the lakes, developing genetic testing tools, and physically removing invaders from waterways. The GLRI also supports risk assessments to identify potential future invasive species. To control species which have already established themselves within the Great Lakes, the GLRI has worked to advance invasive species control technologies and management techniques while promoting public outreach.

Nonpoint Source Pollution Impacts on Nearshore Health: The GLRI seeks to reduce nutrient loads from agricultural watersheds to prevent algal blooms and eutrophication. The GLRI has established four Agricultural Priority Watersheds for nutrient reduction: The Lower Fox River (WI), The Saginaw River (MI), the Maumee River (IN/OH), and the Genesee River (NY). In these watersheds and in other locations, the GLRI provides farmers with financial and technical resources to adopt conservation practices, while promoting nutrient management techniques through outreach and demonstration farms. The GLRI has helped reduce stormwater runoff through green infrastructure and streambank erosion prevention projects. For both of these nonpoint sources, the GLRI has funded monitoring activities and promoted the development of new control strategies.

Habitats and Species: The GLRI has worked to protect and restore species such as the Great Lakes Piping Plover and the Lake Sturgeon through habitat protection, connectivity, and reintroductions. The protection and restoration of coastal wetlands is a particular priority.

Foundations for Future Restoration Actions: To ensure long term success, the GLRI supports various programs to educate youth about the Great Lakes ecosystem, including the Center for Great Lakes Literacy (CGLL) and NOAA's Great Lakes Bay Watershed Education and Training Program (B-WET). The GLRI also supports primary research including annual Great Lakes monitoring.

Impacts

- [A 2018 study](#) by the University of Michigan Seminar in Quantitative Economics found that each dollar of federal spending on the GLRI produces an average of \$3.35 in local economic benefits.
- Under the GLRI, five AOCs have been delisted and 113 BUIs (out of a total 255) have been removed across all AOCs. Prior to the GLRI, only one AOC had been delisted and 10 BUIs removed.
- More than two million pounds of phosphorus runoff has been prevented and 2,150,000 cropland acres are under improved nutrient management in agricultural priority watersheds.
- 500,000 acres of coastal wetland, nearshore and other habitats have been protected or enhanced.

Project Funding

Funds are initially appropriated to EPA, which distributes over half to its [partner federal agencies](#) to fund restoration projects and spends the rest on projects directly. The EPA and partner agencies conduct some of the projects themselves and also fund projects led by states, universities, local governments, tribes, and nongovernmental organizations. GLRI relies on various funding mechanisms including interagency agreements, fund transfers, and grants.