

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](#), released by the EPA in December 2024, covers 2025-29. Action Plan IV sets new ambitious goals and targets for the program, and focuses on long-term resilience for projects.

Congress is currently considering [S.3738, the GLRI Act of 2024](#), a bipartisan bill that would reauthorize the GLRI through 2031 at \$475 million per year.

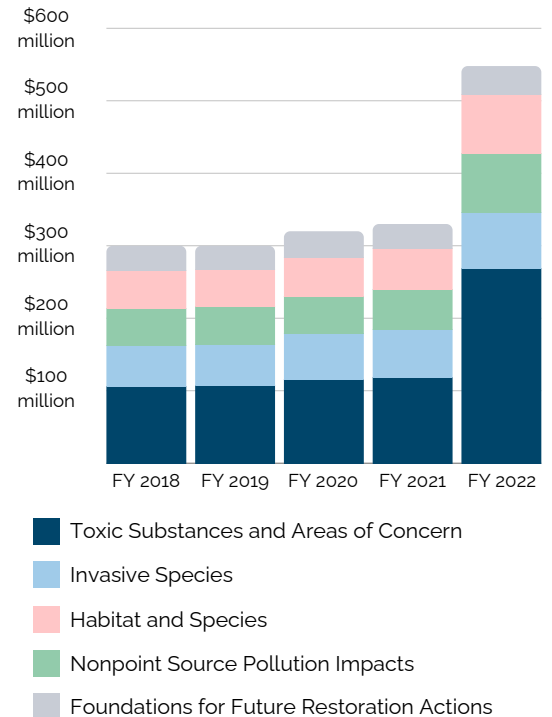
GLRI Focus Areas

Five Focus Areas organize the GLRI's 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 priorities is to delist all 31 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](#). Since the GLRI began in 2010, seven AOCs have been delisted, with another seven expected by FY2029. By comparison, only one AOC was delisted before the GLRI.

The GLRI also seeks to improve information sharing on the risks and benefits of consuming Great Lakes products including fish, plants, and other wildlife. It also funds research to increase knowledge of the environmental impact of contaminants on the Great Lakes ecosystem and human health.

Funding Breakdown:



Further Reading:

[NEMWI GLRI Briefing](#)

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

[GLRI Homepage](#)

[GLRI Economic Impact Study](#)

[GLRI Action Plan IV](#)

Invasive Species: The GLRI seeks to prevent the introduction of new invasive species to the Great Lakes, including 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, seven AOCs have been delisted and 118 Beneficial Use Impairments (BUIs) have been removed across all AOCs. Prior to the GLRI, only one AOC had been delisted and 10 BUIs removed. Management actions have been completed at 10 more AOCs, meaning that although the environment has not yet recovered, the expected work needed for delisting has been done.
- 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.