

Great goals for the Great Lakes

By [David S. Broder](#)

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If you want to be a stickler for journalistic ethics, I shouldn't even be writing about the Great Lakes, because I have a huge bias -- especially when it comes to Lake Michigan.

The highlight of my youthful summers were the few weeks my family shared a cottage atop a sand dune at Miller Beach, east of Gary, Ind. Many were the days we would pack a picnic lunch and carry it down the beach to Burns Ditch, where we could splash in the waves, then have our sandwiches and hike back home. A steel mill stands there now.

For the past 50 years, I've enjoyed the same lake, but 250 miles north, at a cabin on Beaver Island, Mich., which my wife's grandfather built almost a century ago, and which we enlarged after she inherited it. Like everyone who comes under Lake Michigan's spell, I love it.

Sitting here in the snows of Washington, despairing about the Congress I cover, it was the rare bit of good news Sunday when Lisa P. Jackson, the director of the Environmental Protection Agency, gave the governors of the Great Lakes states [the 40-page "action plan"](#) the federal and state governments have developed to protect and improve these incomparable resources.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, as it is called, is a truly bipartisan and binational enterprise, involving leaders and groups from eight states, innumerable communities, the two major U.S. political parties plus our neighbors in Canada.

Back in 2004, when President George W. Bush, campaigning for reelection, stopped in Traverse City, Mich., he vowed to save the Great Lakes, one of the Earth's largest repositories of fresh water. In 2008, Barack Obama, who knew the issue from his service in the Illinois legislature and the U.S. Senate, made it a priority in his presidential campaign, and once he was elected, his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, who had been a leader in pushing for action as a Chicago congressman, saw to it that he kept his commitment.

Obama's first budget included an unprecedented \$475 million for Great Lakes restoration, and this year, despite all the other demands, he has asked for an additional \$300 million.

The EPA set a deadline of January for proposals for using the money; before it was reached, more than 1,000 had been received. The plan handed to the governors, itself the product of 18 meetings with various stakeholders in the summer of 2009, focuses on five major initiatives.

The first goal is to clean up some of the most threatened hot spots, from St. Louis Bay at the western end of Lake Superior almost to the St. Lawrence River on the east, where it leaves Lake Ontario. Studies have identified 31 "areas of concern," imperiled by polluted sediments, and only one of them, the Oswego River in New York, has come off the list.

In a trial run in 2008, the EPA financed [a Great Lakes cleanup campaign](#) that removed approximately 5 million pounds of abandoned electronic gear and 5 million discarded medical pills. Much more remains to be done.

The second goal is to help the lakes resist invasive species. The latest publicized threat comes from the Asian carp, closing in on Lake Michigan from the Chicago drainage canal, but there are also threats from sea lampreys, zebra mussels and other creatures -- all of which must be turned back to protect the native fisheries.

The third goal is to protect beaches and offshore waters for swimming, boating and fishing. This requires reducing the drainage of phosphorus and other chemicals from farms and cities. The plan is to reduce the number of days Great Lakes beaches are closed annually by nuisance algae from 200 to 176 by 2014.

The fourth goal is to protect and restore the habitat for native creatures. The Great Lakes' largest fish, the sturgeon, is in decline because so many of its spawning grounds are polluted or blocked. As 4,500 miles of rivers are reopened to fish passage by 2014, the progress on 16 streams favored by sturgeon will be closely monitored.

The fifth goal is to make this effort visible and credible to American taxpayers by showing real results. The 30 million people who live in this region make it a major political battleground. In an age of rampant distrust, I can't think of a better way to show that government can work.

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