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## Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)

The Great Lakes ecosystem, the largest system of fresh surface water in the world, is an international resource altered by human activities and climate variability. Some alterations have degraded water quality, diminished habitat, led to smaller native fish and wildlife populations, increased invasive (i.e., non-native) species populations, and changed the ecosystem. In response, the federal governments of the United States and Canada, eight U.S. states, and two Canadian provinces in the Great Lakes basin are implementing multiple restoration efforts. Activities under these efforts range from mitigating harmful effects of toxic substances in lake waters to restoring fish habitat.

While efforts to address environmental degradation in the Great Lakes have been underway for decades, in the early 2000s some stakeholders expressed interest in a shared strategy to improve their effectiveness. In 2004, President George W. Bush's Executive Order 13340 created the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force (Task Force) to coordinate restoration efforts. In 2005, federal and nonfederal stakeholders created the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy to outline a framework for restoration. Building upon these efforts, the Obama Administration proposed the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) as part of its FY2010 Budget Request, including additional federal funding to accelerate efforts to protect and restore the Great Lakes. Congress first appropriated funds for GLRI in FY2010 and the Administration released its first action plan to guide the initiative that year. This In Focus provides background on GLRI, including its purpose, governance and implementation, funding, and potential issues for Congress.

### Purpose of GLRI

In 2015, Congress codified GLRI in statute through amendments to the Clean Water Act (33 U.S.C. §1268(c)(7)) to “carry out programs and projects for Great Lakes protection and restoration.” GLRI aims to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Great Lakes basin ecosystem by supporting activities to address specific focus areas. GLRI priority focus areas include toxic substances and areas of concern; invasive species; nonpoint source pollution impacts on nearshore health; habitats and species; and accountability, monitoring, evaluation, communication, and partnership activities. Notable GLRI provisions include a prohibition against using funds for any water infrastructure activity other than “green infrastructure” that improves the habitat and ecosystem of the Great Lakes and a requirement that federal agencies maintain their base level of funding for Great Lakes activities without regard to GLRI funding. Most GLRI projects take place within the Great Lakes Drainage Basin (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Great Lakes Drainage Basin



Source: International Joint Commission.

### Governance and Implementation

When Congress codified GLRI, it directed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to lead federal agency implementation and administration of GLRI, including the development of a strategy to guide restoration, referred to as the Action Plan. The EPA Administrator and Task Force are required to update the Action Plan at least every five years. The first two Action Plans were released in 2010 and 2014. Action Plan III was released in 2019 and covers planned activities for FY2020 through FY2024. The action plans provide objectives, commitments, measures of progress, and annual targets for each GLRI focus area.

### Funding

Congress authorized annual appropriations of \$300 million for GLRI from FY2016 to FY2021. Congress reauthorized appropriations for the program in 2021, increasing the appropriations level to \$375 million in FY2022, with subsequent increases of \$25 million each year to a maximum of \$475 million in FY2026. When Congress codified GLRI in statute, Congress authorized EPA to distribute appropriated funds to other federal agencies for them to undertake GLRI restoration activities and projects under the existing authorities of those agencies.

Congress appropriated a total of approximately \$4.17 billion to EPA for GLRI from FY2010 to FY2022 (**Table 1**). In 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA; P.L. 117-58) provided supplemental appropriations of \$200 million per year to EPA for GLRI for FY2022 through FY2026.

**Table 1. GLRI Annual Discretionary Appropriations**

Fiscal Year	Appropriations (\$ in millions)
FY2010	\$475.0
FY2011	\$300.0
FY2012	\$299.5
FY2013	\$299.5
FY2014	\$300.0
FY2015	\$300.0
FY2016	\$300.0
FY2017	\$300.0
FY2018	\$300.0
FY2019	\$300.0
FY2020	\$320.0
FY2021	\$330.0
FY2022	\$548.0

**Sources:** FY2010-FY2022 appropriations bills and explanatory statements. Amounts are not adjusted for inflation. FY2022 appropriations include \$200.0 million from IJA.

The Task Force, through its regional working group, coordinates work under GLRI Action Plans and selects the programs, projects, and activities that will best achieve GLRI goals. Semiannually, federal agencies in the working group identify the projects they have funded under GLRI. As of March 2022, federal agencies had allocated \$3.37 billion to 6,851 GLRI projects (Table 2).

**Table 2. GLRI Projects and Funding by Agency**  
(\$ in millions, as of March 2022)

Agency	# of Projects	Funding
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry	11	\$13.8
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service	89	\$16.5
Bureau of Indian Affairs	717	\$95.0
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	6	\$4.0
Environmental Protection Agency	1,455	\$1,312.4
Federal Highway Administration	12	\$6.7
Maritime Administration	15	\$32.4
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	433	\$282.0
National Park Service	187	\$52.5
Natural Resources Conservation Service	376	\$220.6
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	1,034	\$475.9
U.S. Coast Guard	59	\$19.9

Agency	# of Projects	Funding
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	1,691	\$489.8
U.S. Forest Service	407	\$112.1
U.S. Geological Survey	359	\$231.6

**Source:** GLRI, “Projects,” at <https://gleri.us/projects>. Amounts are not adjusted for inflation.

## Potential Issues for Congress

While Congress has generally supported Great Lakes ecosystem restoration, the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress may consider questions regarding how much funding should be appropriated to GLRI, oversight of those funds, and restoration progress to date.

## Funding

Stakeholders have different views about the use of federal funds for GLRI. For example, the Trump Administration proposed to eliminate or reduce GLRI funding for certain fiscal years, stating that the change would have returned “responsibility for local government efforts to state and local entities.” Other stakeholders have been concerned with such efforts to reduce federal funding for GLRI. Some stakeholders, such as state officials, have argued that “cost sharing allows big-ticket projects to be accomplished that would be simply too expensive for any one entity to pay for alone.” To this end, some observe that one of the strengths of GLRI and similar place-based restoration programs is their ability to leverage nonfederal funds.

## Restoration Progress to Date

GLRI’s Action Plans have not estimated how long it may take to achieve the long-term goals for restoring the Great Lakes. They acknowledge that it will take many years to realize and document the ecological and human health benefits from restoration of an ecosystem as large and complex as the Great Lakes. GLRI tracks its progress in meeting Action Plan targets and the results of GLRI projects through annual reports to Congress. GLRI reports that federal agencies met or exceeded 72% and 90% of the targets established under Action Plans I and II, respectively.

## Oversight

Congress has shown interest in overseeing GLRI and other place-based restoration programs, including the use of funds and the progress of restoration efforts. Congress requires the Office of Management and Budget to submit an annual GLRI financial report, which includes an interagency budget crosscut report and a list of all projects (and their budgets) to be undertaken in the upcoming fiscal year. Congress also has requested oversight reviews for GLRI and other place-based programs and may oversee their use of supplementary funds, such as those from IJA. In particular, Congress may oversee whether these funds maintain or accelerate basin restoration.

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