



GREAT LAKES
REGIONAL CENTER

GREAT LAKES REGION 2021 Congressional Policy Priorities





Our Vision and Priorities

Clean water is a basic need and human right. Fish and wildlife need an advocate. And for more than 35 years, National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes Regional Center—in partnership with NWF's National Advocacy Center—has been working to protect and restore our region's water and wildlife resources, from the majestic Great Lakes to the Upper Mississippi River, from the Ohio River to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

The Great Lakes Regional Center priorities include:

Protecting and Restoring the Great Lakes

Safeguarding Our Drinking Water

**Protecting and Restoring the Ohio and
Mississippi Rivers**

**Improving Management of Public Lands
and Wildlife**

Mobilizing the Next Generation of Stewards

Advancing Climate Resiliency

The Great Lakes Regional Center is committed to finding solutions and building coalitions with our many partners to ensure that our water and vast natural resources remain healthy, are accessible for all people, and continue to provide for people and wildlife in a changing world. We strive to conduct all of our work through the lens of equity and justice. We do this work by partnering with environmental advocates, urban communities, business leaders, and hunters and anglers. We urge our region's Congressional leaders to demonstrate their support for our region's natural resources, and the people, businesses, and wildlife that depend on them.

Mike Shriberg, PhD
Regional Executive Director
National Wildlife Federation

Protecting and Restoring the Great Lakes

The Great Lakes are vital to the region's economy and way of life. They encompass 95% of North America's freshwater and over 40 million people rely on them for drinking water. Protecting and restoring the Great Lakes ecosystem will benefit our economy, people, and the fish and wildlife that call the region home.



Great Lakes Restoration

PROBLEM:

- The Great Lakes continue to face toxic contamination, polluted runoff, invasive species, habitat destruction, and loss of wetlands, among other threats.

SOLUTION:

- The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) is producing results for people and communities across the region. Increase GLRI funding to \$475 million per year.

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Restoring and Strengthening Clean Water Protections

PROBLEM:

- Waters are interconnected; protecting upstream waterways helps keep waters downstream free from pollution and habitat degradation. The Trump Administration's "Navigable Waters Protection Rule" severely undermines protections for stream and rivers that feed the waters of the Great Lakes and other water bodies across the country.

SOLUTION:

- Support the rollback of the Trump Administration's clean water act changes that would undermine healthy wetlands and streams, drinking water and pose a risk to fish and wildlife; and
- Update the Clean Water Act to make clear that source water and wetlands are protected.

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Stop the Spread of Invasive Species

PROBLEM:

- Aquatic invasive species undermine the ecological and economic vibrancy of the Great Lakes and other inland waters across the region. They are a persistent and unique problem across the country costing the U.S. billions of dollars annually. Ship-borne invasive species cost the Great Lakes Region alone at least \$200 million dollars every year.

SOLUTION:

- Fund the pre-construction engineering and design (PED) for the Brandon Road Lock and Dam plan to help keep Asian Carp and other aquatic invasive species from entering the Great Lakes;
- Adjust the non-federal cost share requirement for the construction of the Brandon Road Lock and Dam project at full federal expense; and
- Fund solutions to remove Asian carp from the Ohio, Mississippi and Tennessee River Basins, which in turn helps reduce pressure on our Great Lakes

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Protect the Great Lakes from Harmful Algal Blooms

PROBLEM:

- Harmful algal blooms have increased across the Great Lakes in the last 15 years, most dramatically in Lake Erie. In addition to ecological impacts, harmful algal blooms produce dangerous toxins that can sicken or kill people and wildlife; create dead zones in the water; adversely impact economies that depend on clean water; and undermine outdoor recreational opportunities.

SOLUTION:

- Fully implement the binational Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement utilizing all federal authorities including the Clean Water Act, Farm Bill, GLRI and other mechanisms to meet the target of 40% reductions in nutrient pollution to Lake Erie by 2025; and
- Fully fund agricultural conservation programs that manage nutrient application, help conserve wildlife habitat, increase buffer strips, and reduce soil erosion.

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Safeguarding Our Drinking Water

Wildlife rely on clean, healthy water, as do people. It is paramount that we secure clean drinking water protections so that all people have access to clean, safe, and affordable water.

Improve Water Infrastructure and Affordability

PROBLEM:

- Neglected, crumbling infrastructure is leading to tainted drinking water, sewage overflows and excessively high utility bills, with low income individuals and people of color affected the most.

SOLUTION:

- Provide at least \$13.5 billion for wastewater, drinking water, and stormwater infrastructure in rural, urban, and suburban communities by supporting the reauthorization of the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) and funding the Clean Water SRF and Drinking Water SRF at no less than \$8 billion and \$5.5 billion respectively;
- Prioritize SRF distribution for communities of color to ensure equitable access to clean water;
- Ensure that infrastructure funding supports nature-based solutions that prevent problems before they become more serious and that enhance climate resilience; and
- Stop water shut offs permanently.

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Remove Line 5 Oil Pipeline from the Great Lakes

PROBLEM:

- Enbridge Energy's nearly 70 year old oil pipeline, Line 5, lies on the bottom of the Straits of Mackinac. University of Michigan researchers have called this location "the worst possible place for an oil spill" in the Great Lakes. In November of 2020, Michigan Governor Whitmer terminated the easement for Line 5 due to Enbridge's failure to meet the terms of that easement and the unacceptable risk the pipeline poses to our fresh drinking water.

SOLUTION:

- Support the shutdown of Line 5 by Governor Whitmer and resist any attempts at federal interference; and
- Strengthen pipeline safety regulations to prevent another potential disaster like Line 5 by incentivizing state oversight programs and funding, increasing transparency on spill response planning and integrity assessment, and increasing maximum civil penalties for serious incidents or violations.

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Protecting People and Wildlife from PFASs

PROBLEM:

- PFASs found in both public and private drinking water supplies pose a serious risk to human health. Of particular concern are impacts to low-income households and other marginalized populations which are affected disproportionately. In addition, elevated PFASs in wildlife can lead to developmental and reproductive problems, and are a threat to subsistence hunters and anglers.

SOLUTION:

- Establish protective federal drinking water and ground water standards for PFASs;
- List PFASs as toxic substances federally;
- Increase the Department of Defense budget that reallocates resources to states to cleanup PFASs contaminated sites (such as Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Michigan);
- Increase federal resources to state and local utilities to help control and mitigate PFASs in their waste water and drinking water systems; and
- Increase USFWS research for PFAS tissue sampling in fish and wildlife.

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Protecting and Restoring the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers

The Ohio River is a working river that is home to more than 25 million people, many of whom depend on it as an economic engine, a source of drinking water, and a place of recreation. The Mississippi River, a cultural and national treasure, runs through 10 states, drains 41 percent of the continental United States and carries more water than any other American river. It provides drinking water, recreation, and a source of commerce for millions of people. Both these rivers face unprecedented challenges that require robust Congressional investment.



Ohio River Restoration

PROBLEM:

- The Ohio River is the most polluted river in the United States with approximately 550 industrial sites discharging pollutants such as nitrates, PCBs and mercury into the river. Additional threats from legacy pollutants, farm runoff, acid mine drainage, invasive species and climate change have led to impacts like a 2015 harmful algal bloom that contaminated more than 650 miles of the Ohio River.

SOLUTION:

- Develop and fund a strong community and science-based Ohio River restoration strategy.

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Mississippi River Restoration

PROBLEM:

- These days, the Mississippi River most closely resembles an over-engineered canal prone to catastrophic flooding, a superhighway for spreading invasive species, like Asian carp, and a vector for carrying nutrient rich run off into the Gulf of Mexico, creating dead zones. It is a far cry from the majestic, iconic river that in its more natural state is a cultural and natural treasure flowing through the middle of the country.

SOLUTION:

- Develop a strong, science-based restoration plan for the river through Congressional creation of a Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative, housed out of EPA as a geographic program similar to the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative; and
- Congressionally authorize and appropriate a new Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission that coordinates and collaborates with state and federal agencies to implement action plans to stop the spread of invasive species.

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Improving Management of Our Public Lands and Wildlife

In 2020, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act that will help improve fish and wildlife habitat, and fund support of outdoor recreation and access on National Parks and public lands across the Great Lakes and country. Despite this historic achievement, wildlife, their associated habitats, and our hunting and fishing heritage remain at risk. The increased threat of privatization of public land, the public's ability to safely and equitably access the out-of-doors, wildlife disease, and habitat destruction continue to threaten our region's fish and wildlife.

Pass Recovering America's Wildlife Act

PROBLEM:

- America is in the midst of an unprecedented wildlife crisis. Once abundant populations of fish and wildlife are now facing steep declines because of habitat loss, disease, and other threats. State and tribal wildlife agencies have limited funding to go towards the conservation and monitoring of at-risk species.

SOLUTION:

- Support the bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act that would dedicate \$1.4 billion annually to state and tribal-led wildlife conservation—helping prevent wildlife from becoming endangered in the first place.

Staff Contact: Marc Smith, msmith@nwf.org



Support the Boundary Waters Canoe Area

PROBLEM:

- The Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) is being threatened by a proposed sulfide mine. The BWCA, one of the world's most visited Wilderness areas and one of the most water-rich forest ecosystems in America, is no place for toxic heavy metal mining.



SOLUTION:

- Support the Boundary Waters Protection Bill, that will withdraw lands within the BWCA watershed from sulfide-ore mining and mineral exploration, approximately 234,328 acres of federal land and waters.

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Great Northwoods

PROBLEM:

- Stretching across millions of acres north of the 45th parallel in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, our Great Northwoods provide vital habitat for a variety of fish and wildlife. The Great Northwoods, however, are facing a unique set of challenges including ongoing pressure to extract resources, a rapidly-changing climate, the exclusion of important stakeholders like tribal nations in decision making, growing outbreaks of deadly wildlife diseases and dwindling funding for science-based management.

SOLUTION:

- Sustainable management of northern hardwood forests as an economic driver for the region including comprehensive management plans for federal forests that ensure access for all people, actively manage for wildlife habitat and climate impacts, and work in partnership with tribal nations;
- Increase funding for the USFS Urban and Community Forestry Program, bringing more forests and green space to the region's population centers; and
- Create a Forest Conservation Easement Program, incentivizing forest conservation and reducing conversion through the use of conservation easements that buy the development rights from private landowners.

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Mobilize the Next Generation of Stewards

One of the best ways to get the U.S. economy moving again is to offer millions of Americans—especially youth of all backgrounds—jobs in a 21st century Civilian Conservation Corps. The work will improve degraded wildlife habitat; restore and reconnect forests, grasslands and wetlands; clean up waterways; improve recreational areas; make communities more resilient to climate impacts and remediate environmental injustices.

PROBLEM:

- There are vast opportunities for fish and wildlife habitat infrastructure projects that could help provide jobs for youth of color and youth living in underserved populations and restore our Great Lakes and natural resources across the country.

SOLUTION:

- Congress should help put millions of youth back to work restoring America's natural resources through a 21st Century Great Lakes Civilian Conservation Corps that incorporates an equitable and just approach. This new initiative would build on increased investments in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and other programs using stimulus dollars.

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Advancing Climate Solutions and Resilience

Adding to the numerous challenges facing the Great Lakes region, climate change threatens to disrupt our economy, have disproportionate impacts on people of color and underserved communities, harms fish and wildlife, and our way of life. Strengthening our coastal community's ability to adapt to changing water levels, restoring wildlife habitat, and transforming our energy policies are the best path forward to address the adverse impacts of a changing climate.

Strengthen Coastal Resilience

PROBLEM:

- Climate change is causing more extreme weather events, including stronger storms and longer droughts while devastating habitat, endangering wildlife and hurting people's livelihoods and communities. This adds to the growing problem of Great Lakes coasts that are susceptible to erosion. A reliance on hardened shorelines undermine the natural features and functions that are critical to create habitats for fish, wetland birds and wildlife.

SOLUTION:

- Provide funding for local units of government to help assess, plan and implement coastal resilient strategies that help protect and restore natural shorelines and infrastructure including in required updates of State Hazard Mitigation Plans;
- Pass the Living Shorelines Act;
- Reauthorize and strengthen the Coastal Zone Management Act;
- Implement the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Great Lakes Coastal Resiliency Study, in coordination with Great Lakes communities; and
- Support investments in coastal restoration and resilience efforts in any infrastructure package introduced.

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Advancing Climate Adaptation

PROBLEM:

- Safeguarding wildlife in the face of climate change is now our biggest conservation challenge. To ensure that wildlife can continue to thrive in a warmer world, we need to make conservation "climate-smart."

SOLUTION:

- Provide incentives for local partners to make their on-the-ground conservation projects more resilient in the face of climate change, and collaborate with local communities to find nature-based approaches to protect people from the impacts of climate change and increasingly severe weather.

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Promoting Low Carbon Future

PROBLEM:

- Wildlife, water and public lands in the Great Lakes region are changing at an ever-accelerating rate driven by climate-induced changes to temperature and precipitation, which adversely impacts communities, habitats and our water resources.

SOLUTION:

- Promote the appropriate use of low-carbon energy and renewable power like wind and solar to help reduce the negative impacts on habitat, our economy and way of life;
- Implement a cap-and-trade program or emission trading program, and a carbon tax. An economy-wide carbon pricing program would create incentives for industry to invest in carbon pollution reduction technology and give the renewable energy industry a competitive edge over energy generation options that have high pollution costs; and
- Encourage renewable energy to be properly sighted on public land to avoid high wildlife value areas.

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*State affiliate organizations of the National Wildlife Federation in the Great Lakes region



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