



May 12, 2023

The Honorable Andy Harris  
Chair

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Jr.  
Ranking Member

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Harris and Acting Ranking Member Bishop:

On behalf of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, we write to urge you support robust funding for Great Lakes restoration in the Fiscal Year 2024 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bill. We are grateful for the much needed support the region has received. We are seeing on-the-ground results because of the investments in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. However, the Great Lakes still face many urgent threats, that if unaddressed will only get worse, and the price we pay will be much higher if Congress fails to strengthen its federal partnership with the region during this health and economic crisis.

First, we ask that you support the critical broad-based USDA Conservation programs that are the foundation upon which the success of Great Lakes restoration efforts are built. These Farm Bill programs are critical to addressing the ongoing challenge of urban and agricultural runoff and its impact on water quality and public health. Experts say toxic algal blooms are fueled by excessive amounts of animal waste and fertilizer washing off farm fields and into the rivers and lakes, including the Great Lakes. Stronger storms, driven by climate change, contribute to the problem, as do invasive mussels that have changed how nutrients impact the lakes. Toxic algal blooms close beaches, kill fish, impact local drinking water supplies (like Toledo, Ohio, in 2014), and when water supplies are contaminated, the most vulnerable members of the community are the first to be impacted. Toxic algae also harm local businesses, by harming local fisheries, curtailing outdoor recreational opportunities, and driving down tourism. With blooms spreading farther and faster and beginning earlier than ever before, we must act to protect communities from this growing threat.

To help the region respond to these algal blooms, we ask you to maintain full funding for the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Farm Bill conservation programs, providing at least \$300 million for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. This

program is well placed to fund targeted conservation practices that will improve soil quality, water quality, and wildlife habitat in regions such as the Great Lakes. It sets aside conservation funding to encourage innovative partnerships between watershed groups and farmers. As partners, these organizations and farmers work together to further the conservation and sustainable use of soil, water, wildlife habitat, and other natural resources on a regional or watershed scale.

Support for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program alone will not be enough to reduce algae-feeding phosphorus in the region's waterways. We ask that Congress provide all Farm Bill conservation programs with funding at authorized levels and provide robust discretionary funding in support of NRCS field staff, as technical assistance is essential for the delivery of conservation support for farmers across the region. If we are to achieve 40 percent nutrient reductions in Western Lake Erie (as agreed to by the region's governors and the U.S. and Canadian governments) we will need a much more coordinated response. Moreover, our region will fall short of our restoration goals if the federal agencies that are vital partners in our restoration efforts do not have the resources to confront this growing threat. These departments and agencies are critical partners with Great Lakes states, cities, industries, Tribes, and non-governmental organizations. Prioritizing investments in our most vulnerable communities, consideration of environmental justice, and ensuring granting and match flexibility through this economic downturn is of utmost concern.

Second, we ask the Committee to support Great Lakes restoration and protection efforts. The USDA is a critical partner in Great Lakes restoration and protection, operating key conservation and regional investment programs that enhance the effectiveness of the GLRI. The Initiative is improving the lives of millions of people and has seen efforts undertaken or completed on more than 7,300 restoration projects throughout the region. Efforts through the Farm Bill's conservation programs -- in partnership with the GLRI -- have seen farmers receive technical and financial support to implement nutrient management actions projected to reduce over 2 million pounds of phosphorus runoff as of 2020 in Great Lakes priority watersheds. These projects are benefiting communities by cleaning up waters that are the drinking source for millions of homes and thousands of industries.

Still much work needs to be done. Algal blooms, invasive species, and toxic pollutants threaten the region, endangering wildlife and public health, lowering property values, and hurting the region's economy. Moreover, emerging contaminants and a changing climate continue to exacerbate the challenges we face, such as flooding and runoff pollution. Many of these serious threats disproportionately impact people that have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice. Allowing these problems to get worse will only put our communities at risk and make them more expensive to solve.

Now is the time to scale up our nation's commitment to restore the Great Lakes environment, protect our drinking water, and support the economy. Progress is being made and the region stands ready to continue this important federal partnership, ensuring that all benefit from and enjoy these investments in restoration and protection. Please ensure that the fiscal year 2024 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies appropriations bill fully funds USDA farm bill conservation programs.

If you have questions regarding this request, please do not hesitate to have your staff contact our Coalition's Senior Legislative Analyst, Alexis Lopez-Cepero, at [alopez-cepero@npca.org](mailto:alopez-cepero@npca.org).

Sincerely,