MAKING WAVES

GREAT LAKES AND ST. LAWRENCE CITIES INITIATIVE
L'ALLIANCE DES VILLES DES GRANDS LACS ET DU SAINT-LAURENT

50th Anniversary of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement: We Need a Long-Term Vision for the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River

What would Canada be without the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence? The importance of Lakes Superior, Erie, Huron, Michigan and Ontario, along with the St. Lawrence River, to our economy and to millions of Canadians cannot be overstated. They are intrinsically tied to our history, contain nearly 20 percent of the world's surface freshwater and provide drinking water for one in four Canadians. The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin is also home to nearly half of Canada's population and sustains a regional economy worth $6 trillion USD.

While most Canadians may not regularly think of the basin's contributions to our quality of life, an immense array of work is carried out daily to protect and manage this vital freshwater resource. Federal, provincial, state and municipal governments, along with Indigenous communities in Canada and the U.S. are key actors and funders. They are supported by a diverse ecosystem of binational agencies and nongovernmental organizations that work actively to advance policy, deliver programming and provide boots on the ground for citizen engagement, cleanup and restoration efforts. Much of this important work is underpinned by the Canada-U.S. Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA).

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the GLWQA, one of North America's signature examples of cross-border collaboration to address environmental issues and jointly manage a shared natural resource. This landmark agreement has led to the accelerated remediation of some of the most contaminated areas of the Great Lakes, while setting a framework for ongoing binational cooperation. As we celebrate the GLWQA's golden anniversary, we must strengthen our partnership with an eye on addressing the current challenges facing our waterways.

Despite 50 years of working jointly to address water quality challenges, we are far from declaring "Mission accomplished." We are still up against threats that could severely hinder the viability and livability of our region – toxic algal blooms threatening access to safe drinking water, thousands of tons of plastics and microplastics ending up in the Great Lakes annually and aquatic invasive species wreaking havoc on our fisheries and infrastructure. Moreover, coastal communities are up against the devastating impacts of climate change.

It appears that in the face of these mounting challenges, Canada and the U.S. are lending renewed interest to the Great Lakes. Recently, the Biden administration and U.S. Congress pushed through a $1 billion investment in Great Lakes restoration as part of the *Infrastructure*

Investment and Jobs Act. North of the border, the federal government has committed to launching a Canada Water Agency and a strengthened Freshwater Action Plan that would invest $1 billion over ten years.

As both nations signal a strengthened commitment to our region's freshwater resources, we have an opportunity to co-develop an ambitious vision for not only restoring our waterways, but also driving clean and smart prosperity in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin. This vision should be based on both a modernized GLWQA, which was last updated in 2012, and by putting forward a binational plan for developing a Great Lakes "Blue Economy," centered on the responsible and sustainable use of our freshwater resources.

Great Lakes cities are frontline actors in managing the impacts of water pollution, climate change and other stresses on our shorelines. They are also important players in the Canada-U.S. trade relationship. For those reasons, municipalities from across the basin are ready to help move our region toward an innovative and integrated economy centered on the integrity of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River while leveraging the full potential of these abundant, yet fragile resources. To get there, they need leadership from Ottawa and Washington in recognizing that the economic and environmental health of our region depends on sustained investments and engagement in maintaining the viability – and leveraging the full potential – of these essential waterways.

Nearly 70 years ago, both countries began construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, a key North American shipping corridor. Then, 50 years ago we came together again to take concrete measures to protect freshwater resources in the Great Lakes. As we celebrate these milestones, cities across the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin want to see our national governments commit once more to advancing a long-term vision for protecting and leveraging our freshwater resources in a sustainable, inclusive and responsible manner.