



Minnesota News You Can Use

Subscribe

COLUMNISTS

Vance could be game-changing Great Lakes advocate

As an Ohio senator, JD Vance supported the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. As VP, his advocacy could play a key role in reauthorizing this historic, pollution-remediation measure.



By Jill Burcum

The Minnesota Star Tribune

JANUARY 22, 2025 AT 6:31PM



THE HEART AND VOICE OF THE NORTH

Opinion editor's note: *Strib Voices publishes a mix of [commentary](#) online and in print each day. To contribute, click [here](#).*

...

The new “golden age” promised by Donald Trump in his inaugural speech Monday ought to include a commitment to finish cleaning up the Great Lakes.

Fortunately, a prominent advocate for doing so, JD Vance, was also sworn in Monday — as our new vice president. The former senator from Ohio should use his powerful perch to enlist Trump and Congress in a noble cause: reauthorizing the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI).

Congress launched this historic effort in 2010. Since then it has powered remarkable progress in cleaning up legacy pollution from industry practices predating modern environmental protections. Minnesotans can see the results for themselves in Duluth, where citizens celebrated last summer the opening of a new waterfront recreation area on the site of a former U.S. Steel operation.

But the GLRI requires periodic reauthorization to ensure its mission and funding continue. Right now, the initiative will expire next year unless lawmakers act.

Congress had been on track late last year to extend the GLRI through 2031, providing around \$475 million in annual funding. In early December, the reauthorization bill [cleared](#) the U.S. Senate. Unfortunately, it stalled in the U.S. House and didn't pass before the session's end, a scenario I worried about when I wrote about the GLRI previously ([“A bipartisan push for Great Lakes cleanup,”](#) Strib Voices, Dec. 8).

But there's still reason to be optimistic about the GLRI's future. [Rep. David Joyce](#), an Ohio Republican whose district includes a stretch of Lake Erie shoreline, has made it clear that reauthorization is a top priority.

Commendably, he's already introduced a [new reauthorization bill](#). It's drawn an early, impressive bipartisan group of 28 cosponsors, 11 of them Republicans and 17 of them Democrats.

Among those who have signed on: Republican Rep. Pete Stauber, who represents Minnesota's Eighth Congressional District. Stauber cosponsored the previous bill. With a district that includes Duluth and an iconic stretch of Lake Superior shoreline, it reflects well on him and Minnesota that he's at the forefront of the reauthorization fight.

Another member of the state's congressional delegation, Democratic Rep. Angie Craig, also cosponsored last year's reauthorization legislation. She is not listed yet as cosponsoring the new bill, but her office said this week that she plans to do so.

A Senate companion bill for Joyce's legislation is in the works and is expected to be introduced soon. Minnesota's two senators, Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith, cosponsored the last reauthorization and remain committed to the Great Lakes cleanup.

"Lake Superior is the world's largest freshwater lake and connects Minnesotans and our goods to global markets. It's an integral part of Minnesota's culture and history and a major driver of our economy, especially across the Northland," Smith said in a statement this week, adding that she "will work hard to pass it."

Klobuchar is on board, too. "In Minnesota, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has cleaned up the pollution at Munger Landing in Duluth, restored important fish spawning habitat in the Saint Louis River, and created opportunities for outdoor recreation. I will keep working across the aisle to reauthorize the initiative so this important work can continue," she said in a statement Wednesday.