



## **Great Lakes Partnerships – The Time is Right to Clean up Legacy Pollution to Benefit Wisconsin Communities**

Testimony to the Speaker's Task Force on Water Quality

Nancy Larson, Wisconsin's Green Fire

September 5, 2019

Chairs Novak and Shankland and members of the Speaker's Task Force, Thank you for traveling to Superior for your important work to hear the concerns of citizens around the state about our water. My name is Nancy Larson and I am pleased to be here today representing Wisconsin's Green Fire, a relatively new statewide conservation organization that provides information based on science and our members' experience with natural resource management. I retired from the DNR in 2016 as a manager in the water program. I am honored to have spent much of my career working with partnerships to protect and restore Lake Superior. I am here to talk with you about three water issues today: flood risk reduction, legacy pollution cleanup in Great Lakes communities, and the federal-state-local estuary partnership in Superior.

### 1. Flood Risk Reduction

I would like to start by thanking you for your support of the legislation to fund a flood risk reduction pilot project in Ashland County (SB 252 / AB 266). I live just south of Ashland, and like many of our neighbors, have been personally affected by the floods of recent years. Our neighbor across the road, who was also our town supervisor, drowned in the flood of 2016. My husband was appointed to the vacant position to help the town through the flooding aftermath. The pilot project is part of long standing federal-state-local-tribal partnerships for watershed planning and to "slow the flow" of runoff in the Lake Superior region. This is similar to efforts around the state to use watershed processes and wetland protection to reduce flooding. You are well aware of the economic and human costs of flooding in Wisconsin and the need for proactive approaches to protect our communities, and I thank you again for your support.

## 2. Legacy Pollution Cleanup in Great Lakes Communities

Wisconsin's Great Lakes communities have a once in a lifetime opportunity right now to clean up legacy pollution. The heavy industry of the last 150 years that built our Great Lakes communities also left us with a legacy of pollution in the bottom sediments of our harbors and waterfronts. Before the Clean Water Act of 1972, it was common practice to dump industrial and municipal wastes with little or no treatment, directly into our waterways. This left us with bottom sediments and water laced with mercury, PCBs, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, dioxin, lead, and metals. Who wants to live, work, and play next to areas contaminated with carcinogens and other toxins? Fortunately, now we can make progress on cleaning up our backyard.

The federal Great Lakes Legacy Act of 2002 and Great Lakes Restoration Initiative of 2010 jump started cleanup around the Great Lakes. It was a long time in coming.

My first job with DNR in 1989 was planning cleanup and restoration of the St. Louis River / Duluth-Superior Harbor, one of 43 designated Areas of Concern around the Great Lakes (five in Wisconsin). We had the excitement and momentum of 150 volunteers: citizens, government agencies, businesses, and researchers to develop the plan. But after that, the plan languished for years with no dedicated funding, and it seemed that cleaning up contamination and restoring habitat and recreational value was only a pipe dream. Then, with the concerted federal Great Lakes funding of the Legacy Act and Restoration Initiative, progress on toxic hot spots was finally possible. The federal funding requires a non-federal cost share of at least 35%, which is significant for multi-million dollar projects. The state contaminated sediment bonding has been critical to progress in Wisconsin.

There are cleanup and restoration projects with federal, state, local government and private partnerships throughout Wisconsin's Great Lakes Areas of Concern. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative operates under an established plan with a proven track record. Cleaning up contaminated sediment is a big and complex lift, requiring specialized expertise and many partners. Because of these integrated partnerships:

- PCBs have been dredged from Sheboygan and habitat is being restored,
- Arsenic and other toxins have been removed at Marinette and habitat restored,
- Lincoln Park on the Milwaukee River is being restored after PCBs and other toxins were removed,
- Habitat is being restored in Green Bay, (following the large PCB sediment cleanup project)
- Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons were dredged from Hog Island Inlet / Newton Creek here in Superior,

- Howard's Bay in Superior will have lead-contaminated sediment removed, and the area will be dredged for better navigational access for Frasier Shipyards and grain elevators, supporting our vital port industries.
- Here in Duluth-Superior, there are also extensive projects on the Minnesota side.
- And there are several other cleanup projects in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin has used \$27 million in state bonding to leverage \$153 million from federal agencies, local governments, and private entities for sediment cleanups. There are more toxic hot spots that need to be cleaned up. The feds want to help us finish the job. The state bonding authority for contaminated sediment projects is essential as non-federal cost share. The time is now to take full advantage of federal partnerships. I never thought I would see the golden opportunity provided by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative in my life time and it won't last forever. I don't believe we will have this opportunity again. Are we going to invest in our Great Lakes communities and help them move into a clean future for our prosperity and quality of life?

Of course we all love clean water. But we can also ask ourselves, is this investment worthwhile in purely economic terms? To address that question, the Council of Great Lakes Industries and the Great Lakes Commission coordinated an extensive economic study of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, published in 2018<sup>1</sup>. It found that every federal dollar spent between 2010 and 2016 will produce \$3.35 in added economic activity through 2036. Cleanups lead to increased property values, tourism and recreation, business activity, and more desirable communities. A case study of the Duluth-Superior area<sup>2</sup> also pointed to population growth of millennials in these communities in 2010-2016, with both communities having an above average concentration of millennials for Wisconsin and Minnesota. In summary, we invest in our future by cleaning up our past.

### 3. Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve – research and education for our communities

Another important partnership during my career was the National Estuarine Research Reserve here in Superior, a federal-state-university-local partnership, administered by NOAA, and only the second freshwater estuary research reserve in the nation. I served on the site evaluation committees to establish the reserve and now am on the board of the friends group. The Lake Superior Reserve brings research, K-12 and higher education, and local outreach to our communities, and is part of the nation-wide environmental monitoring network to evaluate long-term trends in water quality and climate-related factors. The city of Superior was a major champion in having the research reserve located here. The visitor center and offices are on Barker's Island on the Superior waterfront.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I will gladly answer any questions you may have.

Nancy J Larson  
[nlarson@wigreenfire.org](mailto:nlarson@wigreenfire.org)

Citations:

1. Great Lakes Commission and Council of Great Lakes Industries. 2018. Assessing the Investment: The Economic Impact of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. <https://www.glc.org/work/blue-economy/GLRI-economic-impact>.
2. Great Lakes Commission and Council of Great Lakes Industries. 2018. Assessing the Investment: The Economic Impact of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. A Case Study of Duluth, Minnesota and Superior, Wisconsin. <https://www.glc.org/wp-content/uploads/Duluth-092218.pdf>.