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Fund would clean up Great Lakes Basin, drinking water for 40 million

July 13, 2003

By **Mark Libbon**
Washington bureau

Bipartisan coalitions in the House and Senate plan to introduce legislation this month that would commit \$4 billion to the cleanup of the Great Lakes Basin, the largest freshwater system on Earth.

Sponsors of the legislation liken their plan to the \$8 billion federal commitment in the mid-1990s to save the Everglades, which is the source of freshwater for much of the state of Florida. The five Great Lakes provide drinking water for more than 40 million people, including much of Central New York, and constitute 95 percent of the freshwater supply in the United States, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

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The proposed federal Great Lakes Restoration Fund would make block grants available to states that put up some of their own money to tackle the issues of invasive species, pollution and loss of wildlife habitats.

6 It would also create a single, overarching effort to improve the lakes.

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Currently, about 148 federal and 51 state programs fund restoration efforts, according to the U.S. General Accounting Office.

"We've made tremendous progress over the past 20 years (cleaning up the lakes) and we're really at the cusp of possible success," said Jack Manno, executive director of the Great Lakes Research Consortium, which is based at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

Manno, who supports the proposed federal effort, remembers the 1970s, when millions of dead fish and tons of rotting algae created a smelly crisis on the lakes' polluted shores.

He fears that, despite the progress, "the lakes are so altered from the historical damage that's been done to them, and so fragile in many ways, that if we don't keep up with it we will lose everything we've gained."

The fund would aid ongoing efforts to improve conditions in Lake Ontario, where contamination by PCBs and other toxins has forced restrictions on consuming fish from its waters.

Lake Ontario is in a unique position, Manno said, at "the end of the line" for pollution moving from the other four lakes and "first in line" for invasive species imported by ships traveling the St. Lawrence Seaway.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Conservation have identified specific "areas of concern" in Lake Ontario. Among them is the Oswego River/Harbor, which has suffered a decline in fish and wildlife populations because of the excessive growth of aquatic plants and a loss of habitat below the Varick power dam, according to the EPA.

Thomas McAuslan, director of the Port of Oswego Authority and a member of the Great Lakes Commission, said remedial projects on the Oswego River - mostly sewer improvement projects - have made a difference, but thinks Oswego and Lake Ontario would still benefit from an overarching plan.

"I think it makes real good sense, especially to get it under unified direction," he said.

Lake Ontario's more serious areas of concern - with fish deformities, beach closings and restrictions on dredging - are located at the Buffalo and Niagara rivers, in the Rochester area and at Eighteenmile Creek in Niagara County, according to the EPA, which publishes the Great Lakes Atlas at www.epa.gov/glnpo/atlas.

Reps. Thomas Reynolds, R-East Amherst, and Louise Slaughter, D-Rochester, are two New Yorkers who have signed up as co-sponsors of the House bill, whose main sponsors - mostly Midwestern lawmakers - have recruited a Republican and a Democrat from each Great Lakes state.

Those states are Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. The Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec also border the lakes, although the proposed plan does not require cross-border cooperation.

"From increased levels of toxins and bacteria that are killing wildlife and closing beaches to invasive species that are attacking its ecosystem, the Great Lakes need more than help, they need funding," Reynolds said in announcing his support. Other members of Congress who generally



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support Great Lakes restoration efforts, including Reps. James Walsh, R-Onondaga, and John McHugh, R-Pierrepont Manor, have not yet seen the details of the legislation and have not ruled out joining as co-sponsors, their offices said.

A Senate version of the Great Lakes Restoration Fund proposal is expected this week. New York's two Democrats in the Senate, Charles Schumer and Hillary Rodham Clinton, are both interested in seeing specifics of the plan, their offices said.

Just how dirty are the Great Lakes? Both Manno and Dave White, the program coordinator for New York Sea Grant, said the lakes have made tremendous progress, but are constantly facing new threats.

Lake Ontario, White said, has "improved dramatically." The invasion of exotic species is now the No. 1 concern; in particular, Zebra mussels, water chestnut, and spiny water fleas could cause serious problems for the lake, he said.

"It could have a huge effect all the way up through the food chain," said White, who is based in Oswego. New York Sea Grant is a research collaboration between Cornell University and SUNY Oswego.

Although efforts to save the Everglades and Chesapeake Bay have demonstrated the value of watershed-based plans, approving a similar comprehensive effort for the Great Lakes is not a sure thing.

A congressional staff expert in the field warned that money is tighter now than it was when Congress approved the Everglades plan.

At the same time, said the expert, who asked not to be identified, "There's a lot of pretty influential members in the Great Lakes delegation and if they put their collective muscle behind something, it might be doable."

The House proposal would provide \$800 million a year for five or six years, allocated by a formula that takes into account population, exposure to the Great Lakes watershed, the number of areas of concern and critical habitats.

Each state would have to qualify with a management plan approved by the EPA and complying with that agency's "Great Lakes Strategy 2002."

An advisory board would develop a comprehensive lakes management plan, building on the existing catalog of Great Lakes research.

The Senate bill could suggest an alternative way of distributing money, leaving decisions to a commission of governors, mayors and others. The Senate version also could spread the money over more years.

Over the past 20 years, Manno said, governments have made a difference in the Great Lakes. They have stocked the waters with predator fish to stabilize populations, banned the use of phosphorous in detergents, improved sewage treatment facilities and outlawed toxic chemicals like DDT and PCBs.

"But we have other pesticides and new chemicals we don't know about," he said. "The long-term instability, the need for constant management is still there."

The Great Lakes Research Consortium, an association of researchers at 16 universities and colleges, has proposed new facilities in New York to monitor the ecosystem and to evaluate new threats.

"There is no more important environmental resource in the world," said Manno. "We're really at a critical point." Meghan Rubado contributed to this report.

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