



NEWS RELEASE

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From remediation to restoration; from toxic hot spot to vacation hot spot

New federal-state partnership highlights need to protect and restore Great Lakes fish and wildlife

A press conference with Michigan Lt. Governor John Cherry and federal, state and local officials will be held on Friday, July 11, at 10:00 a.m. EDT at the Grand Trunk boat launch at Lakeshore Dr. and McCracken St. in Muskegon.

Muskegon, Mich. – With the summer vacation season in full swing, federal and state officials will meet Friday on Muskegon Lake, on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, to kick off a new partnership to transform a Great Lakes “toxic hot spot” into a Great Lakes “vacation hot spot.” Serving in his capacity as chair of the Great Lakes Commission, Michigan Lt. Governor John D. Cherry will announce a partnership between the Commission and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to begin restoring fish and wildlife in Great Lakes Areas of Concern – or toxic hot spots – designated under the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

The partnership’s initial focus is Muskegon Lake, where contaminated sediments, industrial discharges and shoreline development have degraded water quality and damaged the lake’s once-abundant fish and wildlife. Over the years nearly three-quarters of the lake’s shoreline has been hardened with concrete and other structures, and more than one-quarter of the lake filled with residue from sawmills and industrial operations. In 1985 the lake received the dubious distinction as one of 43 Great Lakes toxic hot spots.

The Muskegon Lake Habitat Restoration Project will continue the lake’s transformation to a place where people want to live, work and play. The three-year, \$3.4 million project will restore 73 acres of wetlands, soften 18,000 feet of hardened shoreline, and remove nearly 9 acres of fill. The project will be partially funded by NOAA’s Great Lakes Habitat Restoration Program, a new effort to engage the agency’s skills and experience in restoring fish and wildlife in the Great Lakes. It will be implemented jointly by the Great Lakes Commission, NOAA and the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission.

“This is a great opportunity to apply NOAA’s unique capabilities in restoring valuable fish and wildlife resources in the Great Lakes,” said Lt. Governor John D. Cherry. “We need to protect our water, making the best use of resources at all levels of government to ensure communities like Muskegon are able to maximize the benefits of being located on the shores of the Great Lakes.”

NOAA’s Great Lakes Habitat Restoration Program will build on the success of the Great Lakes Legacy Act, a federal program started in 2002 to clean up toxic sediments in the Great Lakes Areas of Concern. Cleanups funded under the program have removed nearly one million cubic yards of polluted sediments from the Great Lakes. This includes 90,000 cubic yards of toxic sediment removed from Ruddiman Creek, a tributary to Muskegon Lake and an area to be restored under the NOAA partnership.

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Great Lakes Commission

Lt. Gov. John Cherry (Mich.), Chair; Tim A. Eder, Executive Director

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“We’re on a path from remediation to restoration,” said Kathy Evans, water program manager for the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission and longtime leader of Muskegon Lake cleanup efforts. “It’s not enough to just remove pollution. We have to restore the lake in a way that is sustainable and that will benefit our community,” Evans added.

Habitat restoration is a growing priority throughout the Great Lakes. As historical pollution is cleaned up, many areas are shifting from “remediation” to “restoration.” Twenty-eight of the 31 U.S. Areas of Concern have degraded fish and wildlife. Restoration goals for these and other environmental problems will be completed by the end of the year, after which funding from NOAA and other sources will be critical to restoring the areas and removing them from the list of Great Lakes toxic hot spots.

A recent report from the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration (GLRC) issued a “call to action” to the Great Lakes community to accelerate habitat restoration efforts. The report lists nearly 200 proposed – but not funded – habitat restoration projects in the Great Lakes.

“There is a significant need to restore habitat in the Great Lakes,” Cherry said. “The states and our local partners are prepared to move forward with these projects and we have the programs in place to make this happen. We need Congress to do its part and help fund the programs.”

NOAA’s Fisheries Service supports nearly two-dozen coastal habitat restoration partnerships in the United States, addressing areas such as the Gulf of Mexico and the Columbia River. This will be the agency’s first such partnership in the Great Lakes. NOAA has requested funding for the Great Lakes Habitat Restoration Program since 2006. In 2007 it received more than \$20 million in requests under the program.

In 2005 the federal government and the eight Great Lakes states developed the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration strategy for restoring and protecting the Great Lakes. The plan calls for cleaning up the 31 U.S. Areas of Concern and restoring habitat damaged by pollution, development and other problems. Federal funding to implement the plan has been limited, however, causing frustration in the region over Washington’s lack of commitment to the Great Lakes. To date, only one of the U.S. Areas of Concern has been removed from the federal list of toxic hot spots.

“We have a strong plan and a firm commitment in the region to protect and restore the Great Lakes,” said Cherry. “We need Congress and the federal government to be an equal partner in this effort; the Great Lakes are an environmental and economic asset that merits a national investment equal to the Everglades, Chesapeake Bay and other areas of the country.”

In its legislative priorities for fiscal year 2009 the Great Lakes Commission called on Congress to provide \$28.5 million to restore 200,000 acres of wetlands, \$16 million for the Great Lakes Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act, and \$2 million for NOAA’s Great Lakes Habitat Restoration Program.

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Lt. Governor John Cherry (Mich.), is a nonpartisan, binational compact agency established under state and U.S. federal law and dedicated to promoting a strong economy, healthy environment and high quality of life for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence region and its residents. The Commission consists of governors’ appointees, state legislators, and agency officials from its eight member states. Associate membership for Ontario and Québec was established through the signing of a “Declaration of Partnership.” The Commission maintains a formal Observer program involving U.S. and Canadian federal agencies, tribal authorities, binational agencies and other regional interests. The Commission offices are located in Ann Arbor, Michigan.