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U.S. Senate

Date: Wednesday, April 15, 2026

Committee on Environment
and Public Works

Washington, D.C.

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HEARING EXAMINING RESTORATION EFFORTS IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

Wednesday, April 15, 2026

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The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:05 a.m. in room 562, Dirksen Senate Office Building, the Honorable Shelley Moore Capito [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present: Senators Capito, Whitehouse, Husted.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO, A UNITED STATES
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA

Senator Capito. Good morning, everybody. It is nice to be here.

It is a busy day on Capitol Hill, so we will have members coming in and out. Thank you all for being here. We very much appreciate it.

We are going to discuss a priority of Senator Husted, who should be here in a few minutes, the value of Federal efforts to restore the Great Lakes. And I mentioned, I don't have the Great Lakes in my State, but we have a lot of great lakes.

The health of the Great Lakes is important for achieving our Nation's environmental, public health and economic goals. Together, the five lakes make up the largest system of fresh surface water in the world and are a critical habitat for countless species. They also provide clean drinking water to millions of people in the United States and in Canada.

The region and the Country's economies significantly benefit from the use of the Great Lakes to transport goods, the reliable supply of water for industrial and agricultural purposes and opportunities for tourism and recreational activities. These broad benefits are directly enhanced from efforts to protect and restore the Great Lakes.

Great Lakes restoration efforts have been underway for

decades. President Bush first established the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force by Executive Order in 2004.

Restoration efforts are implemented through various Federal, State, local and private organizations, as well as through cooperative efforts with Canada. One of those key programs is the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, or GLRI.

Congress created the GLRI in 2015 as a non-regulatory program to carry out restoration projects that may include ecosystem and habitat restoration, water quality improvement, education and research and local capacity building.

The GLRI seeks to achieve these outcomes by minimizing and mitigating toxic substances, invasive species and non-point source pollution, as well as improving habitat and species management and laying the foundation for future restoration efforts.

The Environmental Protection Agency leads the implementation and administration of the GLRI program and chairs the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, which is made up of 16 different Federal agencies. Importantly, the 16 Federal GLRI agencies work closely with the eight Great Lakes States, 35 Great Lakes tribes, local governments, universities and private partners to work to advance long-term restoration goals.

The current authorization for the GLRI is set to expire at the end of September. Senator Husted and Senator Peters

introduced S. 528, the GLRI Act of 2025, to reauthorize the program.

As the EPW Committee considers this legislation, this hearing is an opportunity to hear from stakeholders about what has been working well, how the initiative has protected the environment, natural resources and public health, as well as enabled economic development in the region.

Today's witnesses can provide insights on opportunities to improve the initiative to ensure that Federal resources are utilized for the most meaningful purposes. I look forward to learning about how the Federal Government partners with State and local governments who best understand how to prioritize and address the needs in their own backyards.

With that, I will now recognize Senator Whitehouse for his opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Senator Capito follows:]

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

Senator Whitehouse. Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate your convening today's hearing on Great Lakes coastal restoration. I am sympathetic to Senator Husted's desire for funding to protect Great Lakes coastal ecosystems. All our coastal areas, some fresh, some salty, are in dire need of added resources and protection.

I highlight this issue time and again when agencies come before us, the U.S. Army Corps, Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA, and others. Every coastal member of the Senate knows all too well that the Federal Government severely underfunds our coasts.

Coastal counties contribute so much to our economy, \$10 trillion in goods and services annually, and have 40 percent of the U.S. population. Coasts face worsening challenges from storms, sea level rise, excess heat, and acidification. Yet, we under-invest in coastal resources. Upland and inland ecosystems get far more attention and money.

For example, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which I call the Inland and Upland Water Conservation Fund,

receives \$900 million annually, much funded, ironically, by offshore energy leases. When the Great American Outdoors Act was passed, making the \$900 million mandatory, I was promised that coastal funding would get its day. That day never comes.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund does great work, including in my home State of Rhode Island, but it shortchanges oceans and coasts.

Instead of trying to get coasts a larger slice of the Land and Water Conservation Fund pie, taking it from inland and upland work, I have tried to make the whole conservation pie bigger. I created the National Coastal Resilience Fund as a little sibling to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, specifically to focus on coasts.

The fund invests in coastal marshes and wetlands, dunes and beach systems, oyster and coral reefs, coastal forests, rivers and flood plains, and barrier islands, resources that protect property, infrastructure, and fisheries from storms, sea level rise, and other dangers. Several of its grants have gone to the Great Lakes region.

Dr. Holly Bamford of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which administers that fund, can tell us more,

including how many projects they have to turn away because it is so underfunded. One smart solution would be to fund the coastal fund through offshore wind leases, just like how the Land and Water Conservation fund is funded with offshore drilling leases. I would gladly welcome members to join me in that bipartisan effort.

I will also flag the bipartisan Oceans Caucus, which Senator Murkowski and I founded in 2011, to draw attention to our coastal resources, economies and the jobs they support. It includes the Great Lakes, with Wisconsin Senator Baldwin serving as my Democratic co-chair. Back in the day, even Jim Inhofe, of very non-coastal Oklahoma, helped on our coastal work.

The GLRI is a fine program. But in improving our coastal performance, we should take inspiration from an old adage, and lift all boats. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Senator Whitehouse follows:]

Senator Capito. Thank you. I appreciate that.

I will now turn it over to Senator Husted, who has joined us, for his opening remarks and to introduce our first two witnesses.

Senator Husted, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JON HUSTED, A UNITED STATES
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF OHIO

Senator Husted. Thank you, Chairman Capito. It is great to be here with several Ohioans today. I appreciate your holding the hearing on the Great Lakes. It means a lot to the residents of the Great Lakes States, and certainly to Ohio, and to me personally.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. I look forward to the discussion of how Congress can continue to protect the Great Lakes and talk about how a successful public partnership with the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative can be undertaken.

As a member of the Great Lakes Task Force, as well as the only member of this committee that represents a Great Lakes State, I take representing the region very seriously. Promoting good policy and programs are an important part of that.

When I was Lieutenant Governor of the State of Ohio, I worked with our Governor, Governor DeWine, and Director Mary Mertz, who is here today, to protect Lake Erie. We even participated in the Fish Ohio Day together, which I think I won a couple of years, just saying.

I want to thank Director Mertz for being here, and for her leadership of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Director Mertz previously chaired the Great Lakes Commission, a bi-national body that coordinated restoration policy, making her an expert on the Great Lakes and what restoration implementation actually means.

I also would like to thank Dr. Winslow for testifying today. Dr. Winslow directs the Ohio Sea Grant and Stone Laboratory at the Ohio State University College, which has been studying the lake for over 150 years. I also know that the rocky areas around it are a good place to go smallmouth bass fishing.

[Laughter.]

Senator Husted. Those are some personal reflections.

His research on Lake Erie and Aquatic Research Network, LEARN, has a direct connection to GLRI, and I know Dr. Winslow will be able to speak about what is successful and effective about the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and the work that we can continue to do to improve the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes are an environmental and economic asset for the United States and Canada. The lakes fuel a

\$6 trillion regional economy and hold 90 percent of the U.S. supply of surface fresh water, and provide drinking water to more than 40 million people. More than 1.5 million U.S. jobs are directly connected to the Great Lakes, and those jobs generate \$62 billion in wages annually.

I have said this before, it is no secret, that Lake Erie is one of my favorite places to fish and spend time. Ohio has some of the best walleye fishing in the world. I think we call ourselves the Walleye Capital of the World there in Port Clinton.

And I also led the Great Lakes Fishery Reauthorization Act, which was signed into law by President Trump in December of last year. Thank you, Chairman, and all the members for supporting that. Healthy fisheries mean healthy ecosystems and healthy ecosystems mean healthy economies. I firmly believe that.

The Great Lakes fishing industry supports tens of thousands of jobs and contributes billions of dollars to our regional economy. We must stay vigilant against invasive species. I will reiterate that: we must stay vigilant against invasive species, which pose a constant

and serious threat to the Great Lakes ecosystem. We have had those threats before. We have effectively responded to it, but we must remain ever-vigilant.

Harmful algae blooms are also a threat to drinking water and tourism and the local economies that rely on healthy Great Lakes. So many communities depend on it.

I mentioned the invasive species threat and the drinking water threat, two things that we collectively could do something about. It is why the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is important. And it is why it should be, I will continue to fight for its reauthorization and it remains an important Federal commitment to the Great Lakes, the water, the communities, the States, and our quality of life.

So, thank you very much for being here today. And I want to introduce two witnesses, if I could. First of all, Mary Mertz, Director of the Department of Natural Resources in the State of Ohio, ODNR. Mary was the first Assistant Attorney General under Attorney General Mike DeWine, where she oversaw both the legal and administrative operations of the office.

She has extensive legal experience in both private and

public sectors. Prior to her appointment at the Attorney General's office, Director Mertz practiced law at a large multinational law firm. Director Mertz also served as the chief of staff to Mike DeWine when he was Lieutenant Governor, and as the legislative director for Congressman Bob McEwen and the Office of Legislative Affairs in the White House as well, and worked with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources while working under then-Governor George Voinovich.

Director Mertz is an avid sailor, outdoorsperson, and has great knowledge of the topic that we are here to discuss today. Thank you, Director Mertz.

And I will also, while I have a moment, I will introduce Christopher Winslow, Ph.D., Director of the Ohio Sea Grant Program, Ohio State University. He coordinates the Ohio Sea Grant Great Lakes Research Initiatives with agencies and universities as well as assists in research curriculum development and student recruitment at the Ohio State University Stone Laboratory here.

He earned his doctorate at Bowling Green State University with research focusing on interaction between native smallmouth bass and invasive round goby, both of

which, one I enjoy catching, the other I enjoy getting rid of when they take my bait when they shouldn't do that. So one is invasive, one is a trophy, right?

Thank you both for being here today.

Senator Capito. Thank you, Senator Husted. Thank you for your passion on the Great Lakes.

We will start with Dr. Mertz. Thank you, and welcome.

STATEMENT OF MARY MERTZ, DIRECTOR, OHIO DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES

Ms. Mertz. Thank you so much.

Good morning, Chairman Capito, Ranking Member
Whitehouse and Senator Husted. I am really pleased to join
you today.

I serve currently as Director of the Ohio Department of
Natural Resources and as a commissioner of and head of the
Ohio delegation to the Great Lakes Commission, where I
served as chairman from 2023 to 2025. I really appreciate
the opportunity to be here to talk about the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes are one of America's strategic assets.
The lakes hold 20 percent of the earth's surface fresh
water. That is an incredible asset. And I repeat some of
the statistics that Senator Husted just offered, because
they are worth repeating.

Drinking water for 40 million people, a \$6 trillion
regional economy, and in Ohio, Lake Erie is one of our most
valuable natural resources. Tourism, recreation, shipping
contribute tens of billions of dollars in economic value
for our State.

So we truly believe it is vital that we take care of

Lake Erie and the rest of the Great Lakes so that generations beyond our own can continue to benefit as we have.

We are extraordinarily grateful that Congress created the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to protect this really important resource. The program is a powerful tool to combat the threats that are laid out in law to fight toxic substances that foul the waters, invasive species that threaten our fisheries, non-point source pollution that introduces new pollutants to our waters and habitat degradation that damages our wildlife populations and recreation.

So, today, I want to share just three quick examples of how we use Federal GLRI dollars in Ohio to address these challenges and how they are actually making a difference on the ground. First, one of the biggest challenges facing Lake Erie are harmful algal blooms, which are fed by phosphorus. So, this algae doesn't just make ugly green water; it is toxic and harmful to humans. Lake Erie is especially vulnerable to harmful algal blooms.

The problem is so important to us in Ohio that we are investing significant State dollars through our H2Ohio

program, which was created by then-Lieutenant Governor Husted and Governor DeWine. We don't just expect the Federal Government to solve our problems.

So using both Federal GLRI dollars and State H2Ohio dollars, we worked with the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority to essentially rebuild two islands in the Maumee River, one of the greatest contributors of phosphorus, just miles from the shores of Lake Erie.

So I think there is a picture to show of the Clark and Delaware/Horseshoe Islands. We took these islands, the two small islands there, that is a before picture, invested \$13 million, \$5.5 million of GLRI, over \$8 million of State dollars, and we can go onto the after picture.

So why did we do this? This is an effort to reduce the flow of phosphorus into Lake Erie. These islands were rebuilt with diversion mechanisms and wetlands that will filter the phosphorus. It is a unique design to slow down the water. They are also designed to prevent further erosion along the river banks, another source of phosphorus. And as a side benefit, offers incredible wildlife habitat.

So this has been a win-win, all the way around, State-

Federal partnership, working together to solve problems, invest money in something that is working.

Second example involves keeping invasive carp out of the Great Lakes. We know these carp threaten to decimate the abundant fisheries in Lake Erie. So together with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, we identified waterway connections in Ohio where we thought carp could possibly overflow the shores and advance to Lake Erie.

So we identified four of these connection points. Two were of medium risk. And we used GLRI dollars to sever those potential connections. We would build up berms with dirt and sheet pile and rock-filled cages and installed screens, all in an effort to keep the dangerous carp out of Lake Erie and protect our fisheries.

For the grass carp that are already in the Great Lakes, which are also damaging, we have implemented targeted fish removals, using a combination of electro-fishing, gill nets, and these efforts so far have protected our valuable fisheries. So we see this investment making a difference.

My third and final example involves the use of GLRI funds to help the next generation care about, frankly, fall in love with, our Great Lakes and our precious water

resources. We have a program called Students Take Action. We focus on middle and high school kids. We try to get them on the water, teach them why it is important, what they can do to protect it. Fourteen thousand students have been involved in these events, paddling events, demonstrations, hands-on activity. And we want them to care as well.

I see my red light is on, so in conclusion, again, thank you. I hope that the Senate will reauthorize the program. We see its value every single day. And thank you for the opportunity to testify.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Mertz follows:]

Senator Capito. Thank you, Dr. Mertz.

Now, we will ask Dr. Winslow for his opening statement.

You are recognized.

STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER WINSLOW, PH.D., DIRECTOR, OHIO SEA
GRANT AND STONE LABORATORY AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES'
SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Winslow. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair
Capito, Ranking Member Whitehouse, Senator Husted, and
members of the committee.

Thank you for this opportunity for both written and
oral testimony. I wear two hats, as was introduced. I am
the Director of the Ohio Sea Grant Program, a NOAA-funded
and supported program that is based at Ohio State
University. I also direct the Ohio State University Stone
Laboratory, which falls under the College of Food, Ag, and
Environmental Sciences.

In these roles, I spend most of my time at the
intersection between applied research, community needs on
our coast, and the implementation both of remediation and
restoration projects. I have seen first-hand what this
Federal program of GLRI does and how it translates into
real outcomes.

I want to begin my remarks with something we always see
in restoration efforts, is that you cannot have long-term

economic growth in the Great Lakes without a healthy ecosystem. The Great Lakes, as has been mentioned, provide drinking water for millions of individuals, it supports a trillion-dollar economy, but it also sustains industry, communities, and ecosystems that define the Great Lakes region.

GLRI is working. And we are seeing it on the ground. It has been touched on; at its core, GLRI focuses on five things: areas of concern, addressing invasive species, tackling non-point pollution, also building habitat that supports fish, the \$5 billion fishing industry in the Great Lakes.

It also monitors the system, to track progress and identify future threats.

I want to come back to the AOCs, or areas of concern. This is one of the clear examples of GLRI working on the ground. It is an effort to revitalize 26 of the most degraded locations in the U.S. waters of the Great Lakes. Eight are actually de-listed now, but there are 16 more to go.

Each of these delistings and the management actions being deployed in those that are not de-listed represent

years and years and years of coordination and collaboration. Federal agencies, State agencies, tribal governments, researchers, communities on the ground. When these AOCs are de-listed, there are real outcomes. Waters are now fishable. Shorelines see increased recreation, because the beaches are open longer and the waterfronts are accessible.

We see increased economic activity. The communities that live along these areas see vibrant growth. We see reduced costs of doing business. Our water treatment plants now have to do less treatment, because the water is cleaner than it was historically. And we see inland communities, communities that aren't on the lake, moving to these areas to use them.

These are not symbolic wins. These are places that the people can use again. They are fishable, they are swimmable, and drinkable.

So GLRI is working, but it is not finished. There is more work to be done.

I want to shift to talking about why GLRI works. GLRI is not just about funding projects. It is about supporting a systems approach. Community members engage in the

activities that are going to be deployed. There is collaborative planning and implementation, and there is monitoring to adaptively manage these systems and also identify and evaluate.

I see this in Lake Erie, and it has been touched on by Director Mertz, related to harmful algal blooms. Federal agencies, farmers, crop advisors, Sea Grant and Land Grant extension educators are engaged in a systems approach.

We now, through GLRI, and numerous partners, were putting agricultural practitioners on the field that farmers are adopting. They didn't know about these practices. They have been taught how these practices work. And they are also being subsidized to do these, because these are expensive practices.

Wetlands are being created to stop nutrient runoff. And we are seeing which agricultural practices are the biggest bang for the buck.

GLRI supported these efforts, and has helped to reduce nutrient loads to Lake Erie by 8 percent. GLRI works because it aligns people, resources, and expertise toward solutions.

It is a Federal program, but the success is

fundamentally local. GLRI is truly a multi-agency coordination. It is not siloed funding. It is intentionally cross-agency, and that is deliberate.

I want to talk about GLRI protecting communities. With our harmful algal blooms, we have had drinking water advisories in Toledo, 500,000 people without access to drinking water for 72 hours. Because of GLRI monitoring, forecasting and coordinating, our resource managers are now able to respond earlier to these threats.

This is what success looks like. It is not just restoring ecosystems, but protecting people.

As far as looking ahead, we have been incredibly efficient through GLRI to address the challenges of the past, things like legacy pollution, degraded habitats, and impaired waterways. This work needs to continue.

But at the same time, we need to have the opportunity to build on what is working, continue to strengthen, coordination, monitoring, and the research, so that we can better anticipate and respond to future challenges. We all know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

In closing, GLRI works because it connects Federal funding to local action through strong partnerships and

clear outcomes. GLRI demonstrates something very, very important, and it is that environmental sustainability and economic growth are not competing priorities. They are fundamentally connected.

This program works. And it is worth continuing. So, I thank you both for your time and all of you for your time, your leadership. I am happy to answer questions when appropriate.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Winslow follows:]

Senator Capito. Thank you, Dr. Winslow.

Finally, we will hear from Dr. Holly Bamford, Chief Conservation Officer for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Dr. Bamford has been with her organization for the last decade, and has prior experience working at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a Federal agency that is a part of the regional working group that coordinates GLRI restoration activities.

Welcome, Dr. Bamford. Thank you for coming, and we look forward to your testimony.

STATEMENT OF HOLLY BAMFORD, PH.D., CHIEF CONSERVATION
OFFICER, NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

Ms. Bamford. Good morning, and thank you. Chair Capito, Ranking Member Whitehouse and Senator Husted, thank you so much for the opportunity to testify here today on behalf of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Since our establishment by Congress in 1984, NFWF has generated a total conservation impact of more than \$12 billion, reconnecting thousands of miles of streams and restoring millions of acres of habitat. NFWF is proud to be a key implementing partner for three of EPA's geographic programs: the Great Lakes, Chesapeake Bay, and Long Island Sound. These partnerships turn Federal conservation objectives into tangible outcomes by combining Federal funds with State, philanthropic, and private sector resources to enhance their effectiveness.

Complementing our work under EPA's Chesapeake Bay Geographic Program is the Chesapeake WILD program NFWF implements and partners with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Chairman Capito, I want to thank you for your steadfast support of that program. It benefits hunters, anglers and communities throughout the watershed, so thank you.

Across all three geographic programs, NFWF administers a competitive process that is outcome-driven, leverages public investments with non-Federal funding, and directs resources to partners and projects best positioned to deliver durable results. In the Great Lakes region, NFWF has put this model to work, delivering cost-effective, voluntary conservation at a regional scale.

NFWF has been a core GLRI implementing partner since the initiative's inception. Over the past 20 years, NFWF has awarded \$140 million across 530 projects to national organizations like Trout Unlimited and to local champions like the Black Swan Conservancy in Ohio.

The results are significant. More than 2,600 miles of streams have been reconnected for fish passage. That is longer than the Mississippi River. And nearly 60,000 acres of wetlands and upland habitat has been restored for fish and wildlife.

I want to highlight two examples that I think demonstrate the effectiveness of this program. First, in Mentor, Ohio, NFWF awarded four grants over a decade to restore Mentor Marsh on the shores of Lake Erie. The marsh was polluted by salt mines back in the 1960s, turning a

vibrant ecosystem into a wall of invasive weeds.

NFWF helped bring the marsh back from the brink. Now, migratory birds flock there by the thousands, frogs are singing, otters are swimming, and the marsh has become a hot spot for birders.

Second, NFWF awarded \$300,000 to Ducks Unlimited to restore 825 acres of coastal wetland in Michigan's St. Clair Flats Wildlife Area. The project increased the population of waterfowl and marsh nesting birds, which have supported hunting opportunities and benefits the local outdoor economy.

These projects are really great examples of how models such as GLRI can generate real-time conservation wins, while also providing long-term funding to keep the momentum going when it counts. Funding stability through GLRI allows partners to plan restoration efforts, coordinate across jurisdictions, tackle conservation challenges, at the watershed scale. It is one of the Nation's strongest examples of how sustained Federal leadership can deliver measurable results at a regional scale.

While progress is clear, the need remains urgent in the Great Lakes; nationwide as well. For example, the National

Coastal Resilience Fund, created in 2018, had received more than \$3.8 billion, that is \$3.8 billion in funding requests from coastal communities across the Country. We fund less than 20 percent of that demand, due to funding availability.

The gap between what communities need and what is available is substantial and growing. It reflects a national demand for exactly the kind of nature-based solutions that programs like GLRI and the National Coastal Resilience Fund make possible.

NFWF works closely with partners like NOAA and other Federal agencies to administer the National Coastal Resilience Fund by providing funding for nature-based infrastructure to reduce flooding and protect communities. Senator Whitehouse, I want to thank you for creating the program and entrusting NFWF with its administration.

Restoration is fundamental for conserving fresh water, providing habitat for fish and wildlife, and protecting communities. Through GLRI and the National Coastal Resilience Fund, NFWF's partnership with EPA, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and NOAA, we have a proven model: invest in natural systems that work, leverage Federal dollars for

greater impact, and hold ourselves accountable for measurable results.

The need is urgent, and the community that depends on the Great Lakes cannot afford this commitment to weaken. We urge this committee to sustain and strengthen the GLRI.

Chairman Capito, Ranking Member Whitehouse, thank you for your leadership in the programs and the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Bamford follows:]

Senator Capito. Thank you all, great. I will kick us off for questions with a question for Director Mertz.

All three of you have talked about the coordinating and collaborative efforts here. This is not just a Federal effort. It coordinates with local, State, and then you all mentioned non-profits, too. I appreciate that.

Based on your role at the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, how has partnering with these various Federal agencies that are a part of the GLRI Interagency Task Force contributed to tangible restoration?

I guess my question is more, are there competing interests within that? Or does the State take the lead and the Federal comes in as a funder but also an overseer? Dr. Bamford mentioned a myriad of Federal agencies that obviously weigh in here. How do you see that?

Ms. Mertz. I would say foundationally, it is a great relationship. We have a lot of trust in our Federal partners. And we bring them ideas and they work with us on how to fund them.

We especially work well, there is a very talented leader at Region 5 of USEPA, which oversees the Great Lakes and has the Great Lakes National Program Office. She is

very attuned to what is happening in the region and does a fantastic job of working with all of us as best she can.

But there are a lot of Federal agencies involved.

Senator Capito. Right.

Ms. Mertz. That is the truth. Sometimes, we think it would be helpful to have more transparency in how the funds are allocated amongst the Federal agencies and to understand their planning processes. Because we want to be complementary. I highlighted for you a project where the Federal money and the State money came together. That is how they should all work.

Senator Capito. Right.

Ms. Mertz. And so, but there are a lot of Federal agencies involved. And any time you have more than a dozen people, you are going to have a lot of communication, that is a priority.

Senator Capito. Yes. Let's go through what those Federal agencies could be. I am going to start. Corps of Engineers, EPA, Fish and Wildlife.

Ms. Mertz. USDA, several different divisions in USDA.

Senator Capito. NOAA, you mentioned NOAA.

Ms. Mertz. Yes. I am trying to think. That might

cover it, but some different divisions within the Department of Interior.

Senator Capito. Right.

Ms. Mertz. So, there is originally the basket of money.

Senator Capito. Right.

Ms. Mertz. And it is distributed to Federal agencies.

Senator Capito. Right.

Ms. Mertz. And half of that money is spent by the Federal agencies, right?

Senator Capito. Yes.

Ms. Mertz. And it is always interesting to us how they are choosing to do that additive spending. I mean, we are confident they spend it in the region. They show lots of good results. But sometimes knowing more about it would help our planning.

Senator Capito. Yes. I think what you are saying is that if you are spreading it across different Federal agencies, are you diffusing the effectiveness and are they coordinating? I know that they are, yes, they are doing good work. But if one is working here and one is working there, would it be most effective to work here together to

make a bigger impact? I think that is a good suggestion.

Dr. Winslow, obviously you have a role in The Ohio State, I guess is what I am supposed to call it, and I think that the role that universities and research institutions play all across the board, but certainly in this case, are extremely important.

What other things could you tell me about unique roles that a university or research, does the Ohio State invest in, become a partner in some of the restoration efforts, or serve as technical advisors? Do you have students that are doing internships and cooperative arrangements? How does that work with the coordinated fashion?

Mr. Winslow. Absolutely, thank you for the question, Chair Capito.

All of the above. But what I will stress is that the work that happens in the Great Lakes with the help of GLRI is very much applied research. I am an academic, so I do like science for science's sake. But the work that we are doing at these agencies allows us to do research that informs action on the ground, boots on the ground.

Senator Capito. Right, okay.

Mr. Winslow. Also to come back to the students, you

don't have projects that are funded by GLRI and matched by State and other sources that don't have undergrads involved, that don't have master's and Ph.D. students doing the work. That is professional development. Because those ecosystems will need to be managed into the future.

Also, those are not the only ecosystems that need to be restored. So those students, those individuals walking through the process, are learning from lessons in the previous section.

I will say, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and things like HABs that have occurred in the Great Lakes, it has actually created a synergy and a relationship between agencies and academics that has never happened before. We are in a new space where those two individuals or groups of individuals are working more collaboratively now than ever before.

Senator Capito. Good.

Last question, very quickly, to Dr. Mertz. There are eight States and Canada that are involved here with all of the Great Lakes. I guess this is kind of an obnoxious question for somebody who represents one of those States. But is there ever an uncomfortable competition between

States, or are you able to overcome that? Because obviously some States border some lakes, some don't. Is that ever an issue?

Ms. Mertz. Not really.

Senator Capito. Good.

Ms. Mertz. I mean, because we get it. It is the same water everywhere. What happens there is going to affect us. We joke sometimes about, is it a Canadian fish or is it an Ohio fish? Well, it is the same fish. They are just swimming around in the same lake.

Senator Capito. Right.

Ms. Mertz. And so, I think it is far more collaborative than it is every competitive.

Senator Capito. Okay, great.

Senator Whitehouse?

Senator Whitehouse. Thanks very much. Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

There has been some discussion about the algal blooms in Lake Erie. I went to Ohio in the wake of the 2014 algal bloom that shut down the water system for Toledo for several days. It was clearly caused or provoked by climate change conditions. In fact, it was even called, I think, a

bacterial bloom. Algal was kind of a nicer way of saying what was going on in the waters.

I remember going out on the lake with a fishing captain, a guy who hired himself out to take people fishing on Lake Erie. I will never forget the conversation we had. He was kind of a grizzled old guy.

He clearly loved and knew the lake. He said, when I take people out now, I feel like I am cheating them. Because all the knowledge that I have gleaned in years of fishing on this lake is lost, because of what climate change is doing to the lake, the warming and the changing of where fish go.

I basically just take people out for a boat rides now. I used to be able to put them on fish and feel that I was an expert in where fish could be found in different places at different times of years. And that has all just been scrambled.

So as we were talking about Lake Erie, I wanted to call attention to those climate-driven difficulties that the lake has faced. Ohio State has quite a good climate change curriculum that teaches climate change across multiple disciplines. It has a specific aquatic ecology lab that

focuses on Lake Erie's fisheries and what climate change is doing to disrupt them.

Obviously, fisheries don't do well in the middle of an algal or bacterial bloom. When they die in it, they then rot and they contribute to the anoxic and challenging atmosphere.

I will mention one other thing. When I went to visit Lake Erie, then I also stopped by Ohio State. The Ohio State.

[Laughter.]

Senator Whitehouse. And the Byrd Research Laboratory, named after the polar explorer. There is a couple there, Lonnie and Ellen Thompson, who have for decades been traveling the world and drilling core samples out of glaciers. You can go into their enormous freezer and see these enormous tubes of glacial ice that they have saved.

I remember Lonnie pulled one out, and he showed me kind of a dark line in the middle of it. He could correlate that to a dust storm that was recorded in Biblical times. You can find the description of the dust storm in the Bible, and here is the dust from that dust storm now captured in that long column of ice.

Because of what climate change is doing, many of those glaciers have disappeared. So much of the ice that is stored at the Byrd Research Center at The Ohio State is actually, it is a leftover, you can't find that anymore. If you go back to those same glaciers in South America, in Europe, wherever, it is gone.

So what Ohio State has preserved in those core samples is really, really important. And of course, Professor Thompson, I guess they are both Professors Thompson, were pretty remarkable people to talk to. Thinking about Ohio makes me think about all of that.

Ms. Bamford, on the Coastal Resilience Fund, how has the interest been? How have applications been compared to the resources you have to give out?

Ms. Bamford. Thank you for that question. It has been significant. The National Coastal Resilience Fund is one of our most over-prescribed programs we have at the Foundation. We have over 40 programs.

Senator Whitehouse. Provides funding not just to saltwater coastal projects, but also freshwater ones.

Ms. Bamford. Yes, exactly.

Senator Whitehouse. So, people who have a freshwater

coast have an interest in trying to make sure that the Coastal Resilience Fund has adequate funds?

Ms. Bamford. Correct. It actually augments a lot of the GLRI work that we do there, to protect these coastal communities and the economy itself.

Senator Whitehouse. And just because I can't help myself, and I say this like all the time, if you look at the Army Corps of Engineers, it has a massive bias for upland and inland freshwater projects. What it does in coastal and saltwater is negligible compared to its main work.

In my snarkier moments, I refer to it as the Bureaucratic Tributary of the Mississippi River. You look at the Land and Water Conservation Fund, almost everything goes to upland and inland projects. It has essentially, it probably averages near zero the extent of the funding that goes to saltwater coastal ecosystems.

And if you look at the Department of Interior, well, they are true to their name. So there remains this enormous gap between what inland and upland resources get by way of resources and attention and what coastal resources get. So as a coastal State, as the Ocean State,

I am just going to continue to be a bore on that subject until we get some better results from those agencies in terms of equivalency.

Thank you, Chairman. You have heard that before, I know.

Senator Capito. That is good.

Senator Husted, I am going to turn the clock off here, since this is your area and your bill. I will let you go ahead and do your questioning.

Senator Husted. Great, thank you, Chairman Capito.

It is, when you think about the Great Lakes and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and all of the efforts that have been undertaken over the years with invasive species, with water quality, with the fishery, with habitat, I mean, it has been, you alluded to it, but the migration of migratory birds and the number of wetlands and all of the things that have also come as a result of this is really rather astonishing.

But for me, I mean, I was born in 1967. I think if you are an Ohioan, you think of the burning river, when we had, the river caught on fire in Cleveland. That was probably the low point of, or the wakeup call, as we might also call

it, of recognizing that we had really messed up as a society and we needed to fix it as it related to our Great Lakes, our environment and so forth.

The progress that has been made since, because I know we can get down about problems that we have, but we can also understand that we have the capacity to fix these things. Because we have done it in many ways.

And so, I want to give you a little bit of opportunity here, I am going to ask each of you to just talk about the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the partnerships that you have had, and the progress that you have seen, and the hope of what you see for the future.

Director Mertz, let me just give you the opportunity to talk about successes, where the money has been applied, where the collaboration has been applied, what has been achieved, and what you would hope to achieve going forward.

Ms. Mertz. Thank you, Senator Husted. That is a great question, because we have so many victories to celebrate up on Lake Erie. Wildlife alone, we have seen the comeback of the bald eagle in amazing numbers. We feel like we are at a place where we have achieved success in Ohio with nearly 1,000 nesting pair, and much of that is along Lake Erie.

We have seen the comeback of the trumpeter swan. We have seen the comeback of so many waterfowl species. That is what we have seen, and we are in a good place, and we are taking care of it.

There are a number of other birds of concern. But what we see is intentional focus on these areas can achieve success. And that gives me hope for the future. You know if you focus on it, if you put your money, your time, and your science there, you are going to see success. We have this whole list of successes on the return of wildlife and very important species to us.

So those are great success stories that we are very proud of, and we need to see more of that. The return of a lot of the waterfowl is because of the attention we have paid to wetlands, which has both a water quality benefit and the wildlife benefit.

Senator Husted. Can I interrupt you for just a second? Let's talk about wetlands. With the H2Ohio program, we invested in the wetlands for the purpose of absorbing phosphorus and other nutrients that contributed to the algae blooms.

Ms. Mertz. Yes.

Senator Husted. How many acres of wetlands have been created over, in coordination with all of this?

Ms. Mertz. Through the H2Ohio program, we have created, restored, or significantly enhanced over 20,000 acres of wetlands.

Senator Husted. Do we know how much phosphorus that absorbs?

Ms. Mertz. Just in the Maumee, we believe it is somewhere in the 60,000 pounds per year. And the beauty of a wetland is, that is not a fee that you have to pay every year for it to be successful. You make the investment, and that phosphorus reduction will continue for a long time.

So I think that wetland investment for water quality purposes, but then the collateral wildlife and recreation benefits are priceless. We know we are making progress. We know we are reducing phosphorus, because I have my friend, Dr. Winslow here, to keep me honest.

So he leads a consortium of experts in water quality and higher education around the State. They come in and they evaluate almost everything I do. That is okay. Because if I discover we have constructed something in a way that is not getting the benefits that we expect, his

folks and all these other universities working together, and incredible experts in the area, I mean, talk about applied science, they will come in and say, well, you did this, but our modeling showed you should have reduced phosphorus by this, but you only have this. So let's talk about what to do.

But what we are seeing in that dissolved reactive phosphorus is, you know, we wish we were seeing this. We are not. We are seeing this. And that is a step in the right direction.

So what we have is the science and the data to show that this investment in natural infrastructure, plus the other things we are doing in Ohio, working with farmers and --

Senator Husted. Precision agriculture practices that both save them money and reduce the phosphorus runoff.

Ms. Mertz. Exactly. And GLRI assists Ohio's Department of Agriculture as well. So they also receive grants in the non-point source pollution category to do that work.

So GLRI is supporting what the Department of Agriculture is doing in this area, in some cases. They

support what ODNR does in some cases. And they support the research to show it is working.

And on the subject of applied research, it goes beyond them just evaluating everything we do. It is a relationship where I might call Dr. Winslow and say, well, I saw you did this, this, and this. But explain to me, Chris, how does that help me change our behavior? Or, this is exactly what I need to know to change -- we have these conversations all the time. Because I am a believer in the applied part of the research.

There are reasons for all kinds of research. But it is a very close relationship, because we all want to see success.

Senator Husted. To inform your actions, to inform your investments.

Ms. Mertz. Yes.

Senator Husted. To inform how you are going to do --

Ms. Mertz. I have to have that ROI.

Senator Husted. Yes.

Ms. Mertz. I have to prove it to our State legislature, need to prove it to you all that we have our ROI on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

Senator Husted. So as you look forward, this is what you have been able to accomplish, we have witnessed the progress. If we can continue to support the program, what do you see is next? What are the benefits to people, the environment, and so forth?

Ms. Mertz. Right. So, I think we will continue, with invasive species, I think there is some sense that we have appropriate management of the problem. So we just need to continue to monitor and stay on top of it, and not let something bad happen that we didn't expect.

I foresee progress on the harmful algal bloom piece. I think continuing research, continuing technology, continuing investment, and that is what I said, the State had to step up, too. We can't sit back and say, oh, you know, Federal Government, come solve our problem. We need both working together.

I think we will see more progress there. I think the threats to the Great Lakes evolve some. Some things that have been put away, but new understanding of what microplastics might mean, and other emerging toxics that might enter the water.

I think GLRI will continue to play a role as we

continue to successfully manage this lake system.

Senator Husted. I know that you have the responsibility, largely, of working with Canada on Lake Erie, that is an Ohio responsibility. But invasive species have been huge threats to other Great Lakes, the lamprey, and then the combination between the alewife and the salmon, and all. We have literally had to, over time, introduce new species because invasive species have decimated other species. It is a constant learning process.

Ms. Mertz. It is. It is continual. But you mentioned the sea lamprey, I think most of the scientists in the field would say, we have it managed now. It is not great, it is not gone. It is not eradicated. But we have it managed. And that is what we are going to have to do with these invasive species going forward, figure out how to manage them appropriately so we can still enjoy the Great Lakes.

Senator Husted. Let me give Dr. Winslow a chance now to talk about successes that you have seen, as evidence that this works. And then, what do you aspire to see going forward? What do you think is next?

Mr. Winslow. Thank you, Senator Husted. So for me, one of the biggest successes here is again, that systems approach under GLRI. We are not just having agencies to, let's build this here. We are engaging the communities first. We are trying to find out what their needs are. We need that local voice.

We have also, through GLRI and the partnerships, shown that what you see in the lake didn't start in the lake. It manifested from things that are going into the watershed. So for the GLRI and the other agencies, Federal and State, knowing that these wetlands and these solutions for Lake Erie happen up in the watershed.

But that engagement with the community, using Sea Grant and Land Grant extension educators, and actually trained academics, our academics are learning how to talk to their end users. They are not using their acronyms that they used to use; they are talking about their science at a level that people can understand.

So one of the successes, as Director Mertz has highlighted, you see it on the ground. But you see a different connection between the people and that resource. People that live on the land see the importance of that

lake.

The other thing we are seeing, and I mentioned it in my earlier remarks, I have never seen the collaboration that we see now between State and Federal agencies and our academics. I do not run a proposal for research projects unless it is driven by what the agency wants.

So those proposals, what they have resulted in is relationships between our universities and land users, and relationships between our universities and the agencies. It is an amazing collaborative process. That is what I love about GLRI. We can talk about new birds, and we can talk about walleye populations and things like that, but we now have a system to deploy projects that work.

I always say that they target the biggest threats, GLRI does. It is not just, is this project eligible for funding, we are not funding good projects, we are strategically targeting things.

Then we are also at a space, because of applied research and our relationships with other agencies, is we are actually monitoring and tracking progress.

So, Director Mertz, I applaud her efforts in H2Ohio to deploy these wetlands, but then to monitor them. To know

that this wetland only reduced phosphorus by this amount, but if we would have added this plant and changed the direction and flow of water through the wetlands, we could have increased that number. So every wetland we build in the future will be better. Every nature-based shoreline we do in the future will be better.

So that is what I am excited about, is GLRI, with continued funding, can continue to make progress. But we are getting bigger bang for our buck now than we had at the start of this process.

Senator Husted. Let me just, when we have conversations like this, we think about things in isolation of, this is the lake and this is what happens in the lake. But you are right, all the tributaries contribute to this.

The interaction with agriculture, particularly in the Great Lakes Basin, is a huge, huge issue. Look, we want food, we want the ag industry, we want affordable food. We can't, in the name of protecting the environment, drive up the cost of doing this so high that you put an industry out of business and you drive up the cost of food. It is figuring out how it all works together.

It seemingly is not perfect. Always can get better.

But it seems to be working. That is why the agency coordination between agriculture and, in Ohio it would be the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Natural Resources. But it is also at the Federal level as well.

Mr. Winslow. That is one of those big ones, right.

We know that it is GLRI money, goes through USEPA and then trickles down. You need USDA to get that funding, because they have the relationships with the farmers. So you need multiple agencies, both State and Federal. You can't just go there and do work if you don't have a relationship with the folks in that watershed.

I get to give talks to people that live on the lake and tell them the struggles that ag is going through. I am connecting a water-based community with an ag community.

We are also seeing that farmers want to do different things on their landscape to slow nutrient runoff. The problem is, these things we are giving them, the research we are providing them, is not easy to deploy. It is hard to understand, it is hard to do it right. And it is also expensive. Many of these farmers aren't causing runoff by malicious intent, it is the end result of doing ag on the landscape. They want to be there for solutions, but some

of those solutions cost them money without increasing revenue.

So that is why things like GLRI and the money that goes through USDA is critical.

Senator Husted. Well, also in this committee's jurisdiction, we haven't even mentioned the fact that you have municipal wastewater and stormwater issues that also contribute to water quality issues and nutrient contribution to the watershed. Do you want to remark on that?

Mr. Winslow. Yes. I am using it through the lens of harmful algal blooms and nutrient loss. Most of that is coming through the agricultural landscape. Again, not through malicious intent. It is the artifact of doing business.

So most of those investments for HABS and non-point goes to ag. But we do know that in the Maumee River, 8 to 9 percent of the phosphorus comes from wastewater treatment plants. So how do we work with that constituency and that group to help them better treat the water before it leaves?

So there are ways that we work with municipalities. The drinking water treatment facilities, we have done

research that helps them remove toxins from the water, if they are drawing it in from a lake that has harmful algal blooms. So we are working with those municipalities. We used most of our examples in the ag space.

But this helps out departments of health, helps out EPA, helps out municipalities. We now can tell private beaches how to test their water for the presence of toxins. We have data bases and websites that show which beaches have toxins now and which ones are safe for recreation.

So we are in all aspects of this, in the ag space, and the municipality space.

Senator Husted. Looking ahead, looking forward, what recommendations do you have for us on how we can continue to improve?

Mr. Winslow. I would say stay the course. I think the way the investments have gone into the five focus areas has been great. I would just say to continue increasing transparency across the agencies, so projects aren't duplicative, and keep leaning on the relationships that exist with the landowners through your Sea Grant and Land Grant extension.

And academics are starting to understand the importance

of applied research, not just science for science's sake. So tap into that resource of applied research at your academic institutions.

Senator Husted. And as I often say, problem identification is easy. Solution identification is so much more difficult. That is why the applied research aspect of this is so important, because you tell me there is a problem, that is great. But what is a viable, what is a viable, applicable solution to it?

I have seen that from my own first-hand witness of how the program works.

Dr. Bamford, you have listened to the conversation. I want to give you a chance to weigh in on successes and recommendations and what you look forward to.

Ms. Bamford. Thank you. I think we heard such great things from Chris and Mary. Just to add to that, and I think you said it, the ecosystem is extremely dynamic. So we are managing invasives, we are doing really good right now.

But things are always changing. Even you said, we are learning, we are always learning, and we have to apply that learning. Because there is going to be challenges that we

don't even know exist that we are going to be facing.

So I think GLRI provides the resources to tackle those issues, look forward, look toward new technology, but also provide the resources to the different buckets, both the Federal, the State and non-profits.

I think the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, we are excited about continuing to implement this place-based funding. Because we want to focus on the working lands, right? As you said, this is an area, this is a landscape of working lands.

We have to work with the community. We have to do voluntary conservation to implement the right technical assistance, to provide the resources for those farmers to be able to implement those and to sustain it while still being able to pencil out in the black.

I think that is extremely, extremely important, to make sure that the working lands continue to work, but they understand how to implement those conservation practices.

Senator Husted. Thank you. I do want to say that as I look forward, the threat that I am concerned about is the Asian carp, bighead carp, silver carp, whatever we are calling it these days, the threat that that poses to the

entire Great Lakes system. Because I think the question was earlier, do all the Great Lakes systems get along?

Yes, because we are all connected. The water that comes out of Lake Michigan, Lake Superior, Lake Huron, flows down through Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. We are all connected.

If we don't manage it correctly, it is a threat to everyone.

So do any of you have any comments on looking ahead with that threat and what should be done?

Ms. Mertz. Specifically on the carp issue?

Senator Husted. Yes.

Ms. Mertz. So, I think from the State side, and something we focus on very much at the Great Lakes Commission, on the State side, there is very little dispute amongst the States on where that is headed.

Of course, there is the very significant, high profile connection, you know, Brandon Road. We all hope that moves forward and is successful. We have all waited a long, long time for that. So I think States are hopeful that will happen.

I will say, I think in the carp invasive species area is one where at the technical level, there is probably the

most coordination than on any other project. So, Senator, you will appreciate, we have a lot of fish guys. What they will tell me is, hey, we have been meeting with all the fish people in all the States, we have our plan, we have our plan, don't let anybody mess with it.

Because we all agreed, we looked at all the connections we are worried about. We, the States, put them in priority order and we are hitting them off, just like this. And we are all agreed. Like in this case, hey, we here in Ohio, we agree, this thing in Minnesota needs to happen first. Or this thing in Ohio needs to happen first.

And they have sort of this huge group of technical people, and they agree on how to split up the money each year. So that is one where I see the States are all in agreement. Because it gets in one lake, it gets in all, right?

Senator Husted. Right. Thank you.

Anything that any of you want to add that you didn't get a chance to?

Mr. Winslow. Just on the invasive species. We have academics along with these teams that are sampling. We are now knowing where the eggs might go, where the adults are

going. So that is research, studying fish behavior, that can inform trapping and removal of these invasive species.

Director Mertz hit the nail on the head. We are all in lockstep on the invasive species issues.

Senator Husted. Great.

Ms. Bamford. I just want to say thank you so much for this hearing, and this opportunity to testify. This is an extremely important issue, conservation, and the Great Lakes affect all of us. Thank you.

Senator Husted. Yes.

Chairman Capito, thank you for holding the hearing today. Very important issue for all of the Great Lakes States. As you know, I am the only member of the committee that represents a Great Lake State. So it is very important.

Thank you for indulging us.

Senator Capito. Yes, thank you for your leadership, and I want to thank everybody for being here.

I explained earlier, there is a lot going on in terms of committee hearings. So I wouldn't take this as a lack of interest in the issue. I think it is more a prioritization of where, maybe that is why the only one

that is here, because you are the only Great Lakes.

But anyway, with no further questions, I would like to thank you all very much, the witnesses, and all of my colleagues for participation in today's hearing.

Senators who wish to submit questions, written questions for the record, have until 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday, April 29th, to do so. Then I would ask the witnesses' responses to those questions would be due back no later than 5:00 p.m., Wednesday, May 13th. And they will be submitted for the record.

With that, this hearing is adjourned, and thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 11:11 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]