



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF

Mary Mertz
Director, Ohio Department of Natural Resources
State of Ohio, Columbus, Ohio

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Hearing: Examining Restoration Efforts in the Great Lakes Region

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Good morning, Chairman Capito, Ranking Member Whitehouse, and members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. My name is Mary Mertz, and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). In addition to my capacity as Director, I serve as a Commissioner and head of the Ohio delegation to the Great Lakes Commission, and served as Chair of the Commission from 2023-2025. I am pleased to be here with you to discuss the importance of the Great Lakes, Lake Erie, and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) to the state of Ohio.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is a large and diverse state agency. Consisting of ten divisions that employ almost 2,600 men and women at the height of our busy season, our staff and properties can be found in all 88 counties of Ohio. Along the Lake Erie shoreline we have 11 state parks, seven nature preserves, and 240 employees. ODNR comprises a big part of the Lake Erie community. We are on the ground to see its joys and flaws, hear the complaints and praise, and it is a priority to address its biggest challenges and preserve it for the future.

The Great Lakes are one of America's greatest strategic assets. Holding 20 percent of the Earth's fresh surface water, the lakes provide drinking water to 40 million people and support a \$6 trillion regional economy. Between the Great Lakes support of a shipping economy, priceless recreational opportunities, habitat for important land and water species, and drinking water, the Great Lakes have proven they are invaluable and deserving of protection and improvement.

And Lake Erie is one of the most valuable natural resources in Ohio. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), nearly 10.5 million Americans live along Lake Erie. Only Lake Michigan has a greater population of Americans living near its shores. It is also the warmest and shallowest of the Great Lakes, at an average depth of 62 feet, which is about 1/5 the

height of the U.S. Capitol building. It is also one of the most developed shorelines, and those features make Lake Erie particularly sensitive to any negative impacts within its watershed.

Eight Ohio commercial ports contribute to a robust shipping industry on Lake Erie, with ships transporting commodities like coal, sand, gravel, grain, iron, steel, and much more. Maritime shipping operations on the lake handle more than 35 million tons of cargo annually, generating more than 31,000 jobs and over \$6.5 billion in economic activity.¹ Capital investments for ports, terminals, and waterway infrastructure since 2018 total nearly \$1.4 billion.²

In addition to shipping, Lake Erie is an immensely popular recreational destination for tourists – boaters, hunters, and anglers from across the country come to Lake Erie each year. The recreational and tourism industry alone supports 127,000 Ohio jobs and generates over \$20 billion in economic activity.³ The recreational boating industry alone provides almost 20,000 jobs with an annual economic impact of \$5.4 billion statewide.⁴

Along with phenomenal boating opportunities, Lake Erie provides tremendous fishing for walleye, yellow perch, smallmouth bass and many other species of fish. It is known as the Walleye Capital of the World, boasting the best walleye fishing in North America, attracting anglers from all over. Hunting opportunities in the region are also very popular, especially duck hunting. These opportunities attract 2.2 million hunters and anglers annually, who spend \$7.4 billion and support over 45,000 jobs.⁵

Because of its impact on Ohio, it is vital we take care of Lake Erie so generations beyond our own can continue to benefit. Recognizing the importance of Lake Erie, and the entire Great Lakes system, we are extraordinarily grateful that Congress created the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to protect this most important resource. Without clean, fresh water in our lakes, none of what I highlighted earlier is possible.

¹ American Great Lakes Ports Association - <https://www.greatlakesports.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GreatLakesFS-Ohio-jan2024.pdf>

² Martin Associates, “Infrastructure Investment Survey of the Great lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway System,” December 2023: https://www.greatlakesports.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/AGLPA_InfrastructureInvestmentSurvey_EN_Dec4-A.pdf

³ Tourism Economics, “The Economic Impact of Tourism in the Lake Region of Ohio,” June 2018: https://ohiotravel.org/aws/OHTRV/asset_manager/get_file/266481?ver=0

⁴ National Marine Manufacturers Association 2023 Economic Impact Study: [file:///C:/Users/10200209/Downloads/Ohio%20Marine%20Economic%20Impact%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/10200209/Downloads/Ohio%20Marine%20Economic%20Impact%20(1).pdf)

⁵ Ohio Division of Wildlife, “Participation Levels in and Economic Contributions from Outdoor Recreation in Ohio,” 2023:

<https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/ohiodnr.gov/documents/wildlife/general/OH%202023%20Participation%20and%20Expenditures%20Report%202023%2010%2006.pdf>

GLRI and the fight to protect Lake Erie

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is a powerful tool for federal agencies, Ohio and local entities to combat the biggest threats to Lake Erie, including those challenges outlined in statute:

- Toxic substances;
- Aquatic invasive species such as invasive carp, sea lamprey and zebra mussels;
- Habitat degradation;
- Nonpoint source pollution, that contributes to problems like Harmful Algal Blooms; and
- Educating the public on Great Lakes issues and solutions.

I'd like to share a few examples of how we have used GLRI in Ohio, and why it is important.

Harmful Algal Blooms

First, one of the biggest challenges facing Lake Erie are Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) – this algae is not just ugly green water, it is toxic and harmful to humans. We have been very focused on solving this problem in Ohio, because Lake Erie is especially vulnerable compared to the other Great Lakes.

And this is an example where we do not expect only the federal government to solve the problem – Ohio is investing its own money on these efforts as well. GLRI is used as a force multiplier in Ohio via the state-funded H2Ohio program. This program is the signature water quality initiative of Governor Mike DeWine, instituted in 2019 to reduce phosphorous in the Lake Erie watershed and across the state.

The example I would like to share involves GLRI and H2Ohio working together toward the restoration of the Clark and Delaware/Horseshoe Islands in the Maumee River. The Maumee is the largest watershed of any river feeding the Great Lakes in the US or Canada. It is also one of the greatest contributors of phosphorous to Lake Erie, and phosphorus feeds harmful algal blooms. ODNR and the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority worked together on this project, which essentially rebuilt two islands with a very unique design.

The restoration work uses the two islands to divert water through wetlands that act as a filter for the phosphorous and sediment heading toward Lake Erie. The GLRI contributed \$5.9 million in funding and H2Ohio contributed over \$8 million.

By installing rock and inner channel reef barriers around and within the islands' original footprint, the project created ideal conditions for sediment capture as water flows down the Maumee River into Lake Erie. Coves were also contoured with varying depths, providing areas with suitable habitat for fish and

freshwater mussels at different water levels. This project is the largest known habitat restoration investment in the Maumee River.

Along with water quality improvements, the restored islands reduce wave strength through that portion of the Maumee River, resulting in reduced erosion along the riverbank (also a source of phosphorous), a more resilient habitat for fish and wildlife, and enhanced recreational opportunities.

Today, the restored Clark Island is now 10.8 acres, only 40% of its 1940s footprint, and the Delaware/Horseshoe Islands are now 2.8 acres. This is a fantastic success story on how state and federal governments programs can cooperate to achieve improved water quality in the Lake Erie watershed. Figure 1 and 2 at the end of this testimony show the before and after version of the island restoration project.

This is just one of many natural infrastructure projects that we have undertaken with GLRI funding. And the data shows dissolved reactive phosphorous flowing into Lake Erie is decreasing. My colleague from The Ohio State University, Chris Winslow, can speak to his independent evaluation that shows the success we are seeing in Lake Erie with these projects.

Invasive Species

Second, I want to share with you how we have used federal funding to fight invasive species. One of the biggest threats to the Great Lakes are invasive bighead, silver, and grass carp. These species threaten to decimate our abundant fisheries by outcompeting native fish and reducing aquatic vegetation important for native fish and waterfowl.

The US Army Corps of Engineers identified waterway connections between the Mississippi River and Great Lakes Basins where invasive carp could advance to the Great Lakes. In Ohio, four connection points were identified – two as low risk and two as medium risk (Figure 3).

The medium risk points identified as needing action are at Little Killbuck Creek in Lodi, Ohio, and the Ohio Erie Canal in Akron, Ohio. ODNR has used funding from GLRI to sever access through these pathways by raising the elevation between the watersheds to the 100-year flood risk plus one-foot elevation using berms, sheet pile, and gabion baskets (rock filled cages). In the case of the Ohio Erie Canal, we also installed actual screens to prevent invasive carp movement into the Lake Erie watershed (Figure 4). Ohio has taken this proactive approach to close these connections prior to the carp's eventual presence at these locations.

ODNR is also using GLRI funds to eliminate grass carp that are currently reproducing in the western basin of Lake Erie in the Maumee and Sandusky rivers (Figure 5). We are working to eradicate this population through targeted fish removal using a combination of electrofishing and gill nets. This

work is in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC), University of Toledo, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and US Geological Service. Early indications are that the population is shrinking, and continued efforts could eliminate them from Lake Erie following the *Lake Erie Grass Carp Adaptive Response Strategy 2024-2028* (GLFC 2023).

We are also focused on controlling and removing invasive plant species, including hydrilla, which are highly invasive, vine-like weeds that grow in the water. These plants can overtake lakes, while negatively impacting native fish and recreation (Figure 6). Through GLRI funding, we are searching inland lakes in the Lake Erie watershed for invasive plants and eradicating known populations.

Why do we do this? Because, without action, these invasive species can become the dominant plant in a waterbody in as little as three years. Current control efforts are at Springfield Lake in Akron, Ohio (Lake Erie Watershed) and at Mosquito and Pymatuning lakes (just outside the Lake Erie Watershed) because they pose a threat to Lake Erie (Figure 7). We are also educating the public about how human activity can cause further spread, such as moving boats from one lake to another, and providing prevention techniques through signage at boat ramps and participation in the Great Lakes Landing Blitz which is a basin wide campaign to educate the public on invasive plants and how they can help.

Third and finally, we use GLRI funds to engage with middle and high school students in the Lake Erie watershed through the Students Take Action program. The goal of the program is to help the next generation care about, and fall in love with, our precious water resource in Lake Erie. We get kids out on the water, teach them why it is important and what they can do to protect it.

Since the inception of the program during the 2021-2022 school year, the program engaged nearly 14,000 students at more than 100 different Ohio schools or educational organizations from 31 counties. Dedicated staff have provided nearly 200 in-school presentations, 100 field trips, and 37 educational kayaking trips. Staff also engages with the general public, reaching nearly 49,000 people.

Students engage in real world learning opportunities, access wetland sites, learn about career opportunities, and more. They get hands-on experience of what our professionals do every day, including:

- Demonstrations with the University of Toledo to discuss invasive grass carp and their impact on our wetlands.
- Trash pickups at various wetland locations
- Partnering with the Toledo Zoo & Aquarium on their population monitoring program of the state-threatened Blanding's turtles.

These opportunities open doors for the next generation of conservationists to further our progress on water quality and habitat protection at Lake Erie. Figure 8 and 9 at the end of this testimony showcases students participating in some of the activities they participated in as part of this program.

The Future

We are thrilled with what has been accomplished with GLRI dollars, and I hope you can see how it has made a real difference. I hope the Senate will reauthorize the program, and I also hope you will consider some adjustments for the future Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, including:

- 1) More autonomy for states to decide which projects should be funded, for efficiency purposes. The states are closer to the issues, know their shorelines, and have a good perspective on the biggest challenges we need to solve. Block grants for competitive dollars should be considered, so states can apply their knowledge and deploy these dollars where they know they are needed the most.
- 2) Better transparency on the use of money awarded to federal agencies by US EPA. I am confident federal agencies are deploying these dollars in effective and productive ways. However, states do not typically know how they spend GLRI dollars. If states have greater insight into their decisions and know what projects they are funding, states could make complementary decisions on their own projects.
- 3) Start the process to change focus areas for funding. These priorities were set in 2011, and we have learned more about how to solve complex problems that transcend specific focus areas. And we have made progress in some areas, such as delisting some Areas of Concern. Now, new challenges are arising and GLRI priorities and funding must be flexible enough to respond to these evolving challenges.

Conclusion

GLRI is vital for the health of Lake Erie and the Great Lakes system as a whole. Ensuring high water quality is not only critical for public health, but also for our economy, and our very way of life. I am thankful for the leadership of Senator Husted, and this committee, in recognizing the importance of this program and I encourage the Senate to reauthorize the GLRI and pass S. 528, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to discuss this important resource for Ohio. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

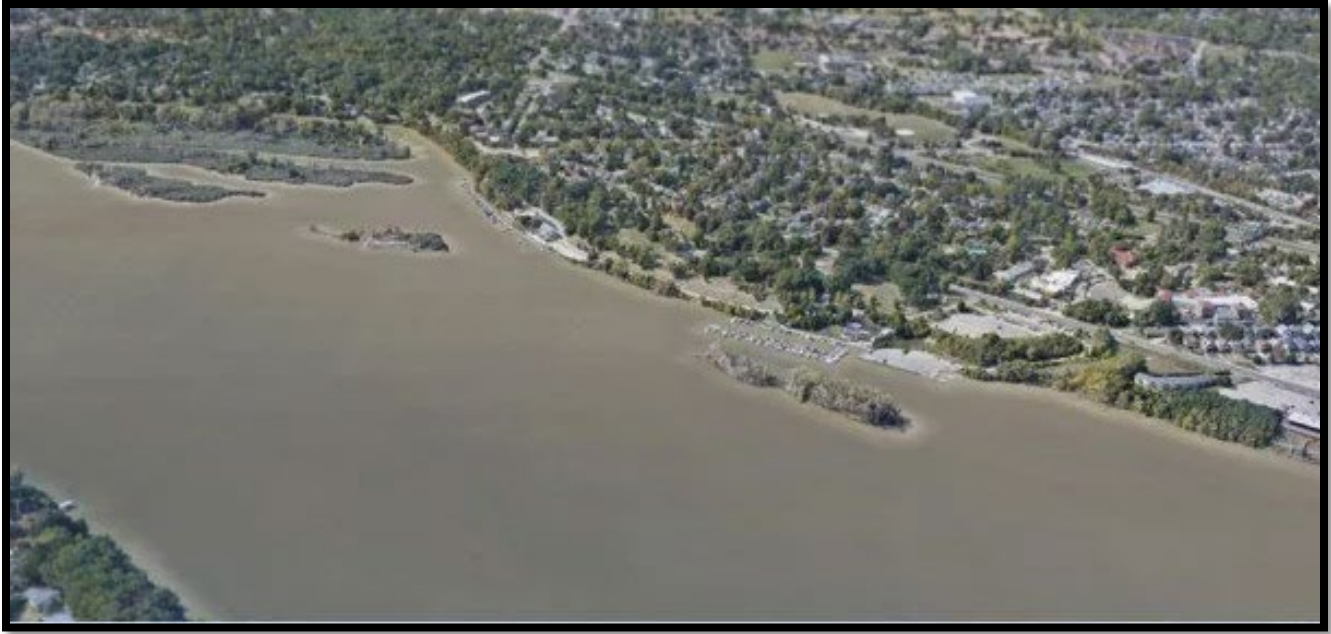


Figure 1: Clark and Delaware/Horseshoe Islands before restoration efforts.



Figure 2: Clark and Horseshoe/Delaware Islands after restoration efforts.

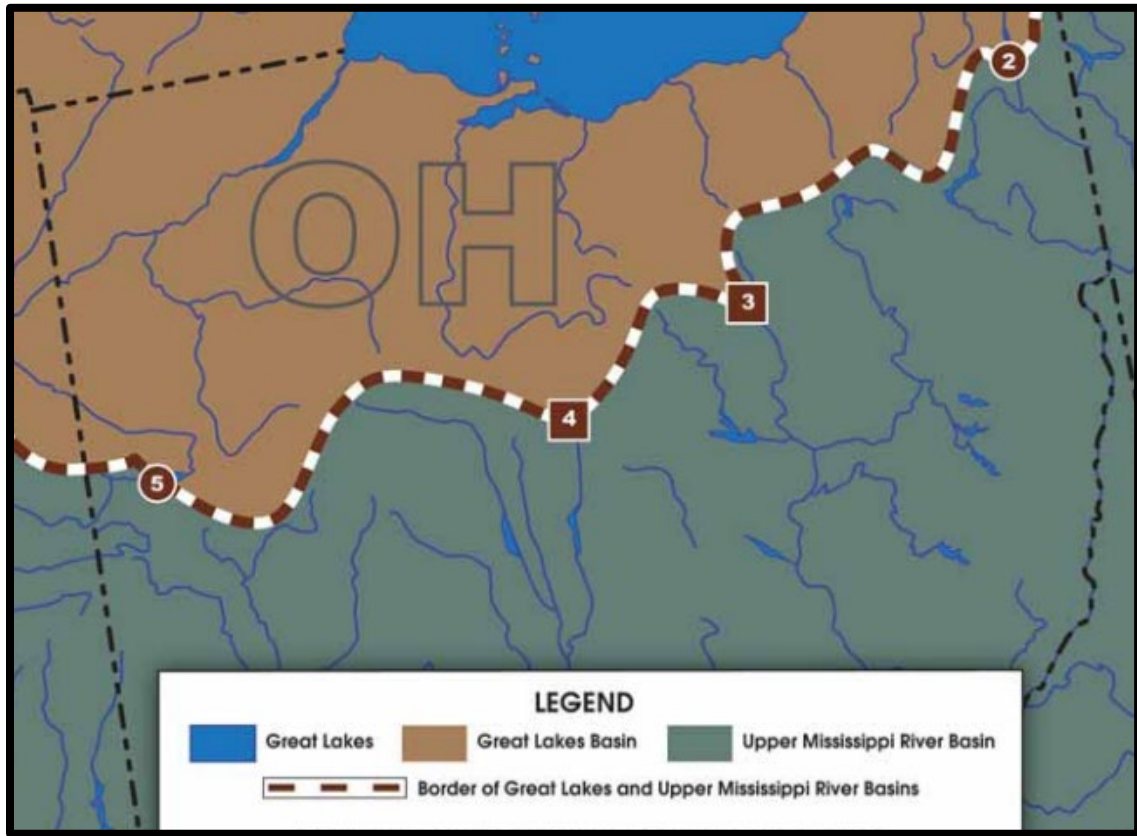
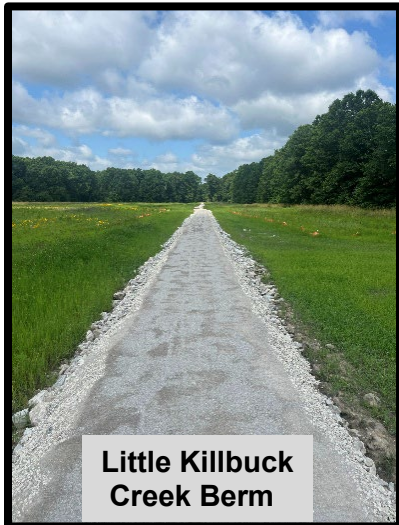


Figure 3: Map of Bighead and Silver Carp connection points



Little Killbuck Creek Berm



Ohio Erie Canal Gabion Baskets



Ohio Erie Canal Canal Screen

Figure 4: GLRI projects to sever access of Bighead and Silver Carp to connection points



Figure 5: Grass Carp Removal Effort on the Sandusky River.



Figure 6: Hydrilla infestation in the Lake Erie watershed



Figure 7: Hydrilla surveying in the Lake Erie watershed



Figure 8: Students from Clay High School participating in Blanding's Turtle Monitoring at Magee Marsh Wildlife Area as part of the Students Take Action Program



Figure 9: Sentinel Career Center students participating in invasive species removal at East Harbor State Park, in collaboration with US Fish and Wildlife Service, as part of the Students Take Action program.