



# Strategic Plan 2020-2022

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Left: Josephine Mandamin,  
Anishinaabe water protector and activist

## Water Vision for the Great Lakes

Living in the Great Lakes region, we are surrounded by lakes, rivers, wetlands, and shorelines. Water is ubiquitous in the lives of Great Lakes residents, from recreation and rejuvenation to drinking and business. These resources, while abundant in our region, are precariously positioned in a rapidly changing world. Threats to the livelihood of the water ecosystems that support human life are numerous, diverse, and simultaneously political and biological.

Combatting preventable threats and managing unpreventable threats often falls to local community groups, non-profits, tribal and First Nation governments, watershed councils, and municipalities. Recently, Freshwater Future gathered input from over 700 residents in the region and our member groups on the state of water in their communities, their hopes for the future, and the opportunities they see for improvement.

### Five themes emerged:

**Revered**— The law and popular culture will recognize the fundamental importance of water resources to human life, as well as their value outside of human use and consumption

**Safe**— Families can trust that their tap water, well water, and places of recreation are free of harmful contaminants and toxic chemicals

**Clean**— Preserved wetland ecosystems and well-engineered infrastructure filter pollutants and keep wastewater out of waterways

**Accessible**— Communities have abundant, well-maintained, and affordable public access to rivers, lakes and drinking water

**Sustainable**— Water withdrawals and cycles of human use do not exceed natural replacement rate or overwhelm natural filtration processes







*Fresh Water Crew*

**MISSION:** Freshwater Future is a catalyst for community action that strengthens policies designed to safeguard the waters of the Great Lakes region.

**VALUES:** Freshwater Future is a collaborative and entrepreneurial organization that seeks perspective from diverse communities and individuals, builds partnerships and collaborations, works to ensure equity in the solutions we advocate, and values residents' knowledge and abilities in our work to protect and restore the health of the Great Lakes for current and future generations. The waters of the region that define our sense of place include the five Great Lakes, but also include the critical connecting waters such as inland lakes, rivers, wetlands and groundwater. We protect these waters for their many natural benefits such as: fish and wildlife habitat, intact ecosystems and an amazing 20% of the Earth's fresh surface water, but also for their benefits to people: clean drinking water, fish that are safe to eat, and beaches that are safe for swimming.

## Challenges and Opportunities

In the 1960s prior to the adoption of the Clean Water Act, rivers in the Great Lakes region were so polluted they caught fire. Nearly 50 years have passed since these fires spurred a huge shift in our federal policies and attitudes toward water in both Canada and the US. With the adoption of water-related laws, such as the U.S. Safe Drinking Water Act and Clean Water Act; Canada Water Act, Fishers Act and Canadian Environmental Protection Act; and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, our waterways have come a long way toward restoration by requiring sewage plants and industry to pretreat water before it is discharged. While the intent of the Clean Water Act and other water laws was to stop people and companies from using our waters merely as dumping grounds, and to recognize the importance of water resources for our cities and communities, the effectiveness of our water laws have been reduced in implementation by both regulatory changes and judicial decisions. Funding reductions at the federal and state levels weaken enforcement of our regulations and consistency. The recent federal administration has adopted rules that eliminate vital regulatory protections. For example, a rollback of regulations adopted during 2008-2016 would eliminate federal protections for half the nation's wetlands and miles of streams. Our existing laws are not adequate for the challenges facing our waters today, such as microplastics, toxic algal blooms, PFAS and climate change.

Similarly our laws have not kept up with drinking water impacts. Lead contamination highlights the breakdowns in how our drinking water is tested and the systemic problems with regulations and our government systems. Harmful algal blooms threaten drinking water safety in several locations. The cost of water continues to increase, placing a much higher burden on our impacted communities, that has resulted in massive water shutoffs that increase costly public health problems. Regulations for emerging toxins such as PFAS don't exist. New chemicals and new ways of using chemicals are not sufficiently regulated through these laws.

As a result, our waters—Great Lakes, inland lakes, rivers, streams, shoreline, groundwater, wetlands, and tap water sources—are extremely threatened. We are facing a crisis. Crisis, in the true sense of the word, is a turning point in which weaknesses are exposed, challenges are confronted, and opportunities for innovation arise.

It is unacceptable, indeed, an injustice—given the wealth, knowledge, and capacity for innovation in the Great Lakes region and in North America more broadly—that people cannot drink the water coming from their taps. That we cannot safely swim in our lakes and rivers. That fish that should be part of a sustainable source dietary protein are unsafe to eat and or to harvest in any significant quantity for fear of wiping out populations.

Now is the time for a significant upgrade to our federal laws that regulate the protection of our waters- surface, groundwater, and drinking water. Communities around the country know what they need and want for water security and safety. It means providing access for all, affordable rates, comprehensive monitoring of quality, transparency, decisions that prioritize equity, environment, and economy, safe waters for recreating, resilience to climate impacts, such as flooding, and much more.



# Goals

Freshwater Future's bold response to the water crisis is outlined below in the following goals.

**Goal Revered:** The Great Lakes Network is functioning alongside Freshwater Future, utilizing science and a public health perspective to ensure that local, state, provincial and federal laws, regulations and culture recognize the importance of healthy waters.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Maintain at least eleven vibrant issue subnetworks in the Great Lakes Network and increase group membership by 10%, supporting subnetworks through capacity support and clarifying desired outcomes.
- Coordinate the four Freshwater Future led subnetworks and communicate the accomplishments of each to expand progress on these issues.
- Support at least two community-led policy/regulatory/enforcement initiatives.

**Goal Safe:** Families and Communities are able to trust the safety of water for drinking and recreation, and have access to affordable water through transparency, education and science.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Support adoption of Michigan affordability policy, and use as a model for other states in the region.
- Utilize testing data to increase transparency in water management and oversight, as well as at least 3 locally-important issues per year, through engagement and recommended actions.
- Elevate Youth Innovation Practice and Voice through at least three events and projects.

**Goal Clean:** Drive good decisions about water resources and water protective infrastructure to ensure natural systems and human systems are clean and resilient.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Assist at least three communities in implementing the Stormwater App to advocate for science-based and community preferred solutions.
- Develop model stormwater fee guidelines through an equity lens.
- Host at least two educational forums on water contamination, Green Infrastructure and flooding.

**Goal Accessible:** Rivers, lakes, wetlands and drinking water are healthy and accessible to families and communities throughout the region regardless of income.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Fully establish and support at least four Community Water Councils.
- Develop a Water Community Benefits Agreement template and Water Democracy Toolkit for water councils.
- Elevate at least one policy impacting multiple Community Water Councils.

**Goal Sustainable:** Waters are sustainable and the human uses of those waters do not exceed their capacity for renewal.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Provide a minimum of \$55,000 annually in grants that create long-term impacts on water.
- Drive organizations and coalitions we participate with abide by our guiding principles for collaborating with community partners.
- Establish a new base of funders that abide by the guiding principles.

**Goal Thrive:** Increase the sustainability and equity of Freshwater Future and its mission-related programs.

**FUNDING OBJECTIVES:**

- Increase unrestricted revenue by expanding our supporters and large gifts by 5% annually.
- Continue to diversify revenue sources by obtaining two new foundation sources annually and expanding corporate support by 10% each year.
- Secure dedicated individual donor and major donor personnel to maintain and expand relationships with our donors and supporters.
- Increase revenues for Canadian program by utilizing innovative approaches to address the limited funding sources in Canada.
- Adapt fundraising program to current conditions building in flexibility and creativity to respond to external conditions.

**COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES:**

- Create content that reflects the human impact of our work.
- Increase brand visibility and awareness to elevate Freshwater Future as one of the most respected environmental organizations in the region.





*Freshwater Future, The Junction Coalition of Toledo, and Clean Water for All Campaign Host Great Lakes Water Youth Camp*

## Long-Term Goal: Reform Legal and Regulatory Protections for Water

The U.S. Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Water Act; Canada Water Act, Fishers Act and Canadian Environmental Protection Act; and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement are the federal policies and protections in place for our Great Lakes waters. These protections are our strongest “tools” toward ensuring healthy Great Lakes waters. While these protections and policies have certainly benefited our waters, they are being undermined to allow unsustainable development to occur, and are unable to keep pace with the scale of threats like climate change, accumulation of toxic pollution, over-use and more.

Working with our partners, including the bi-national Great Lakes Network we will continue to watch-dog on the ground issues and continue to move policy on those issues. In addition, because the primary laws of the two countries are woefully inadequate and will require significant repairs to the systems and new elements if we are to meet the vision above. Working toward this vision, we must do more than apply bandaids on regulations or address every single chemical that threatens our health. A more comprehensive approach will be needed. The policy work will continue to be supported by providing grant funding to groups when possible to help facilitate their participation in communication and advocacy efforts, linking needs from their work to these federal policies. In addition, updates to laws at federal, state, or local level must be developed using a fair, just, and equitable process.

Freshwater Future recognizes that the threats facing our waters require bold strategic actions. Over the next three years, our work will drive us toward achieving our vision of water as Revered, Safe, Clean, Accessible and Sustainable. We will not lose sight of the big picture, that solid legal and regulatory frameworks are needed to preserve progress that we make.



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