



Priorities for Ensuring Access to Safe, Affordable, And Reliable Drinking Water in the Great Lakes Region and the Country

Recommendations from Great Lakes Community Advocates — March 7th, 2024

Protect public water systems from privatization

Private, for-profit corporations are increasingly buying public water utilities across the United States. Investor-owned utilities charge 59% more on average than public utilities adding to the factors making water unaffordable for families.

Recommendations: Support tools that prevent using federal money for privatized water systems such as those in the Water Affordability, Transparency, Equity and Reliability (WATER) Act. Oppose the Clean Water State Revolving Fund Parity Act to open up federal investments in wastewater systems to private companies.

Create a pathway for long-term water affordability

The share of federal funding to water utilities has dropped from over 60% in the 1970's to under 10% now. Despite an EPA water bill affordability standard of 4.5% of median household income, a fifth of low-income residents pay disproportionately more - over 12% - of their disposable income. Programs like the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) are important tools for preventing water shut offs so that residents can break away from the violent cycle of water debt and disconnections.

Recommendations: Incorporate water affordability measures into any infrastructure package, such as funding grants instead of loans for disadvantaged communities and incentives for utilities to adopt more equitable water and sewer rate structures; Provide a mandate to the U.S. EPA to create a single, uniform definition of *disadvantaged communities*; Renew LIHWAP, now expired, as a long-term program; Incentivize income-based long-term affordability programs¹; and Ban water shut offs to protect public health and the human right to water.

Ensure public access to federal investments of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

¹[Moonshot Mission, Water Affordability Analyses for Six Michigan Communities, 2022](https://tinyurl.com/29vf9k74) (https://tinyurl.com/29vf9k74)

Great Lakes Restoration Funding has been instrumental in moving the remediation of Great Lakes Areas of Concern forward. These restored areas of concern have long been in communities struggling with economic issues due to the contamination and blight caused by past industries. Once restored, these waterfront communities have become attractive to developers, bringing in high-end developments and 2nd homes, making housing less affordable for members of the community and limiting access to the water for recreation and fishing.

Recommendations: Require that all Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding include a stipulation ensuring continued or expanded public access.

Address cumulative mining impacts on the Great Lakes

Recent federal priorities to develop and secure domestic supply chains for critical materials has incentivized a resurgence of mining in the Great Lakes region. The Copperwood, Eagle, Talon, Tamarack, and Tilden mines are examples of mine development and expansion that threaten 21% of the Earth's fresh surface water.

Recommendations: Direct the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a cumulative impacts study of existing and potential mining projects around Lake Superior.

Address Causes of Harmful Algal Blooms

Numerous studies show massive growth and problems in the number of confined animal feeding operations, manure produced and applied, and nutrient runoff in the western Lake Erie basin. Nutrient runoff is the leading cause of formation of harmful algal blooms in the lake. Lake Erie continues to suffer and it is becoming apparent that current voluntary best management practices of large agricultural operations simply aren't enough to mitigate run-off into the lake.

Recommendations:

Support solutions such as the Healthy Farms Healthy Watersheds Act of 2024 as an amendment to the Farm Bill and a requirement to report numbers in each county for inventory and production with no exclusions. Support manure and nutrient management of large agricultural operations through funds for monitoring and enforcement of the Clean Water Act.

Invest in drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater infrastructure

Aging drinking water infrastructure threatens our region's future prosperity and the health of our citizens. Leaking pipes lead to significant waste, in some cases as much as 50% of a system's treated water. Aging, outdated, and over-burdened combined sewer systems release sewage and stormwater into the Great Lakes each year, closing beaches and spreading contaminants and pathogens that pose a substantial threat to public health. Disadvantaged communities face significant barriers to accessing water infrastructure funding and rely on unaffordable rate increases.

Recommendations: Increase funding for the State Revolving Fund programs and increase subsidized funding for disadvantaged communities. Direct 30% of the funding through Drinking Water State Revolving Funds to be spent on lead line replacements each year to support the new mandate in the U.S. EPA's Lead and Copper Rule.