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Great Lakes next Everglades?

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Booth News Service

WASHINGTON - A massive cleanup plan for the Great Lakes is being forged by advocates who say the time is ripe to finally eradicate pollution that has plagued the region for decades.

Now that Congress has approved a multibillion-dollar restoration project for the Florida Everglades, hopes are high that a similar-sized federal effort can be mounted at dozens of "toxic hot spots" in the Great Lakes.

"The Everglades is an important national treasure and deserved its day in the sun," said Mike Donahue, executive director of the Great Lakes Commission, an eight-state advisory board. "Now, it's our turn."

The sentiment is being echoed by leaders of environmental groups, managers of government agencies and key members of Congress throughout the region.

"The time is certainly right for a large-scale restoration effort on the Great Lakes and the dedication of significant federal funding to this effort," said U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat who co-chairs the Senate's Great Lakes task force.

Proponents of such a project caution that it won't be easy.

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"The Great Lakes is a much more complex and larger ecosystem than the Everglades," said U.S. Rep. Vern Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids, co-chairman of the Great Lakes task force in the House. "And the problems are different, ranging from invasive species to sediment contamination."

But since Congress has agreed to a \$1.4 billion down payment on a \$7.8 billion restoration project in the Everglades, it will be easier to make a case for spending that kind of money in the Great Lakes, he said.

The buzz about a cleanup plan has been growing louder among Great Lakes activists as the Everglades project came together this year.

It took nearly two decades of lobbying by state and environmental leaders in Florida, but Congress agreed this month to split the cost of the Everglades restoration with state, local and industry groups. The project involves replenishing the vast wetlands and wildlife habitat that have been drained for development and flood control in South Florida.

The Great Lakes also have long-standing needs, said Dave Cowgill, chief of technical assistance and analysis at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regional office in Chicago.

"Our interest remains high in making sure this part of the country gets its problems solved as well," he said.

Chief among them are the hazardous industrial chemicals clinging to the bottoms of rivers, bays and near-shore waters throughout the Great Lakes basin, home to more than a third of the nation's manufacturing plants and 18 percent of the world's fresh water.

The EPA says contaminated sediments are a main reason why fish in the Great Lakes remain unsafe for frequent consumption. The agency estimates that nearly 350 sites around the region contain tons of toxic muck.

"These sediments pose a continuing threat to human health," said a U.S.-Canada board this summer.

The two governments have identified 42 sites as "areas of concern" with top priority for cleanup. In Michigan, they include White Lake and Muskegon Lake near Lake Michigan, the Kalamazoo River and the Saginaw River and Bay.

A major fear is that if contaminated sediments are not cleaned up, they'll be spread around by a once-in-a-century flood, said Margaret Wooster, executive director of Great Lakes United, a coalition of environmental groups.

"There's a sense of urgency that we need to get them out before they're flushed into the lakes and are impossible to retrieve," she said.

That's exactly what happened in 1986 when tons of PCBs dumped into the Saginaw River for two decades by the General Motors Corp. plant in Bay City were dispersed into Saginaw Bay by a heavy rainstorm.

GM agreed in a 1998 court settlement to pay \$28 million for sediment cleanup in the area, but the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates it will cost billions more to remove the deadly compound from the bottom of the bay.

No one knows exactly how much it would cost to purge pollutants from Great Lakes waters, though most assume it will be in the billions of dollars. It cost \$55 million in 1998 just to clean up tiny Willow Run Creek near Ypsilanti that was lined with PCBs from a Ford Motor Co. plant.

Whatever the cost, environmentalists say it's worth the effort.

"Our kids won't be able to eat the fish until we clean up these areas of concern," said Emily Green, director of the Sierra Club's Great Lakes program in Madison, Wis. "We've got the tools, we know how to clean these up, it's just a matter of getting the political will to get it done."

Members of Congress from the eight states bordering the lakes should have enough clout to land money for the cleanup, said Tim Eder, director of the National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes office in Ann Arbor.

"The question is whether they have the political will and whether there would be a convergence of bipartisan support," he said. "If groups like us and government agencies argue that a project like this is the way to go, we could probably muster enough pressure on the congressional delegation."

An economic case also can be made that a healthy Great Lakes is worth billions of dollars to the region, argued Thomas Baldini of Marquette, U.S. chairman of the International Joint Commission, a U.S.-Canada board that oversees management of the Great Lakes.

"The fresh waters of the Great Lakes are not just a national but a world resource," Baldini said. "We have to go out and articulate that this is a resource that is very precious."

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