

Forward

Lake St. Clair:

A Call for Action

Key Topics:

- 1) Congressional authorization
- 2) How the management plan was developed
- 3) Management plan structure and content
- 4) A catalyst for action

Much effort and substantial public and private investments have been made to restore and preserve the environment of the Lake St. Clair watershed. Real and meaningful improvements have been realized and progress continues.

Despite this progress, problems persist - some a legacy of past pollution, some a result of current human activities, and some the result of budgetary priorities and/or constraints relative to the support of environmental protection or restoration efforts. Beach closures along Lake St. Clair, discharges of inadequately treated wastewater, and concerns about the safety of public drinking water supplies, in particular, have focused public attention on threats to the lake. In the mid 1990s on the U.S. side of Lake St. Clair, an unusual set of environmental conditions interacted resulting in poor water quality and beach closings. As a result, public use of the lake significantly declined impacting the local economy, and public awareness of water quality problems was heightened.

As public concern grew over the water quality problems and related economic losses, many locally driven initiatives developed to grapple with the environmental challenges. The Macomb County Blue Ribbon Commission Report on Lake St. Clair was an important effort to comprehensively address Macomb County's impacts to Lake St. Clair. It has resulted in many notable accomplishments, including the appointment of an environmental prosecuting attorney in Macomb County and the formation of citizen-led water quality boards in Macomb and St. Clair counties.

By the late 1990s, there was an increasing interest in taking a more comprehensive, holistic approach to managing the lake. While the environmental issues facing the lake and several of its tributaries have been addressed under larger Great Lakes initiatives including the Upper Great Lakes Connecting Channels Study in the 1980s and more recently, the Lakewide Management Plans (LaMP) and Areas of Concerns (AOC) programs, Lake St. Clair does not have a specifically dedicated management program or environmentally-based designation. In this regard, some residents perceived Lake St. Clair to be the "forgotten lake" since its environmental issues were not getting dedicated and individual attention. However, environmental agencies recognized that efforts to correct more urgent issues in the St. Clair River and Clinton River and tributaries would also help to improve the overall health of the lake.

St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair Comprehensive Management Plan

Section 426 of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1999 authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to develop a comprehensive management plan for the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair. The legislation directed the USACE to coordinate efforts with federal, state and local governments and Canadian federal and provincial authorities and to develop a plan that:

- Identifies the causes and sources of environmental degradation to Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River;
- Addresses continuous monitoring of organic, biological, metallic and chemical contamination levels;
- Provides for the timely dissemination of information of contamination levels to public authorities, other interested parties and the public; and
- Include recommendations for potential restoration measures.

In responding to the legislative intent, the Corps initiated development of the plan on receipt of funding in mid-2001 with funding and plan development continuing through 2004. During the early development of the management plan, the USACE recognized that the management plan recommendations would largely fall outside of the agency's mission areas. Therefore, the USACE emphasized broad coordination with public agencies and local stakeholders in developing the plan, and afforded substantial flexibility in responding to local interests in determining the document's form and content. As a result, the management plan recommends that successful, locally-driven programs continue and that larger efforts be coordinated by an intergovernmental steering group. Just as the counties have focused on pollution sources within their boundaries, the management plan focuses on controlling pollution sources in the larger Lake St. Clair watershed.

How the Management Plan was Developed

The USACE contracted with the Great Lakes Commission (GLC) to assist in developing the management plan. The Great Lakes Commission, a public agency with formal ties to the Great Lakes states and provinces and a mission to advance the sound use, management and conservation of the Great Lakes, provided technical and outreach assistance to the Corps in preparing the plan.

A Canadian multi-agency writing team compiled the bulk of the Canadian information in the management plan. The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority hired a researcher using funds provided by Environment Canada and the Great Lakes Renewal Foundation. Working under the direction of the writing team, the researcher prepared the Canadian material, which Environment Canada provided to the USACE for incorporation with the U.S. information into combined chapters. In addition to the Canadian information in this document, Canadian agencies will develop Canadian recommendations for the lake independent of this management plan, following public consultation, and the Canadian federal government will release a separate management plan.

The management plan was developed in close collaboration with U.S. and Canadian federal, state/provincial and local agencies and other stakeholders in the Lake St. Clair-St. Clair River watershed. The project was coordinated through a four-part, binational structure with the following elements:

- **The Project Management Team** included representatives from government agencies with planning or management responsibilities for Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River and their watersheds. It provided overall leadership and direction in developing the plan and was the primary mechanism for coordinating public agency participation in the effort.
- **The Management Plan Advisory Committee** included a larger group of agency and nongovernmental stakeholders with an interest in Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River. The Committee provided input on the purpose and scope of the management plan and reviewed and commented on the document as it was developed.
- **U.S. Technical Workgroups** were the primary mechanism for drafting specific portions of the management plan. The workgroups were composed primarily of public agency staff with knowledge and expertise related to specific portions of the document.
- **The Canadian Writing Team**, described above, was the primary mechanism for gathering and communicating information relating to the Canadian portion of the Lake St. Clair watershed.
- **The Project Secretariat** consisted Great Lakes Commission staff, who worked on behalf of the Corps of Engineers in convening the Project Management Team and Advisory Committee; coordinating communications with, and outreach to, other interested parties; and assembled the draft and final management plan document.

The Project Management Team was first convened in September 2001 and met four times during the project period. The Advisory Committee met on three occasions. Each of the Technical Workgroups met via conference call several times, with additional communications by telephone and email. A website was established at www.glc.org/stclair on which information was posted on the management plan, meeting summaries and other materials. Finally, project staff presented information on the management plan at dozens of meetings over the course of the project period.

Additional binational coordination occurred via a framework established under the Four Agency Letter of Commitment for the Binational Areas of Concern. This agreement, signed in 1998 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), Environment Canada (EC), the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), and the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (OME), outlined roles and responsibilities for restoring the three upper connecting channel Areas of Concern, which include the St. Marys, St. Clair and Detroit rivers. In 2000 the agencies approved a resolution that incorporated Lake St. Clair under the Four Agency process. This Four Agency framework facilitated important communication and policy coordination at the management level, as well as substantial technical assistance at the staff level.

Further coordination was conducted with the public and stakeholders at the EPA sponsored State of Lake St. Clair Conference held in June 2003. The preliminary management plan recommendations were presented at conference sessions and input invited and discussed at facilitated conference breakout sessions. Finally, the draft comprehensive management plan was posted for further public input on the project website in July 2003.

Management Plan Structure and Content

At the outset of the project USACE and GLC consulted with the Project Management Team and the Advisory Committee to determine what the management plan format, including the issues to be addressed, the target audience, and the appropriate level of technical detail for the document. Resolving these questions was not simple and there were differing views and preferences among the many parties involved. Ultimately, a general consensus emerged that the management plan should

- be a concise, action-oriented document that synthesizes existing studies, plans and recommendations into a cohesive framework;
- build upon and elevate initiatives already underway or planned without duplicating existing efforts;
- adopt an ecosystem approach that addresses the full suite of issues affecting Lake St. Clair, and its surrounding watershed;
- provide a vision for the binational Lake St. Clair community and guidelines and recommendations to achieve that vision; and
- elevate the profile of the lake and watershed within the broader Great Lakes system.

Based on this, an outline for the document was developed that provided for

- an overview of Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River (Chapter 1);
- a vision statement, principles and a series of goals and objectives to guide implementation of the plan (Chapter 2);
- a summary of the environmental health of the lake and river, including a review of the sources and causes of environmental degradation (Chapter 3);
- a series of topic-specific chapters addressing the full suite of environmental, resource management and human health issues related to the lake and river (chapters 4 through 8); and
- a final chapter outlining a prospective implementation framework for the plan (Chapter 9).

Given the congressional direction to produce a “comprehensive” management plan, and the broad range of resulting issues to be addressed, there was an immense volume of material to consolidate into the document. The binational dimension of the document compounded this challenge, and efforts have been made to fully reflect the Canadian perspective on the Lake St. Clair watershed. Thus, the level of detail presented in the document was determined by consensus; it is not as concise as some would like, although it is significantly shorter than management plans for the other Great Lakes.

The document has also sought to reflect a general consensus regarding the status of environmental conditions on Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River and the effectiveness of associated governmental management programs. Some readers will prefer a more critical assessment of governmental efforts and some a more complimentary approach. The management plan reflects a middle ground between these divergent perspectives.

The document is aimed at the educated public, including elected representatives, local officials, interested citizens, business leaders, and others with an interest in restoring and protecting Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River in a sustainable manner. Sufficient technical information has been included to “tell the story” about the Lake St. Clair watershed without overwhelming the reader. Technical terms and jargon have been avoided whenever possible, and explained when they are a necessary part of the narrative. Finally, key points, important documents and studies, and other significant details have been highlighted in the left margin.

While they vary somewhat in structure, the primary topical chapters in the document (chapters 3-9) begin with an identification of key issues and the relevant goals for the chapter. General background information is provided on the main chapter subjects, followed by a review of findings and recommendations for each of the key issues identified for the chapter. This discussion provides background on each issue and a review of U.S. and Canadian programs and initiatives relevant to that issue. In some cases, this material is separated into U.S. and Canadian sections so that readers can focus on the material of direct interest to them. Recommendations are grouped by issue. The management plan also includes a matrix that illustrates the linkages between the management goals, objectives and recommendations (Appendix A) and a Guide to Assistance for U.S. Recommendation Implementation (Appendix B).

The document is intended to augment, but not replace, other planning efforts. As such, the reader should bear in mind the following considerations when reading the management plan:

- **The St. Clair River:** The St. Clair River has been designated as an Area of Concern under the provisions of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Canada is leading the development and implementation of a Remedial Action Plan (RAP) to address beneficial use impairments identified for the river. A great deal of effort has been invested in the St. Clair River RAP process, including broad public participation via the St. Clair River Binational Public Advisory Council. Therefore, while the river is discussed in this management plan, the document as a whole builds upon the work done on the St. Clair River to emphasize environmental issues related to Lake St. Clair. Specifically, the goals and objectives in the plan pertain *only* to Lake St. Clair, since a separate suite of goals and objectives has already been developed under the St. Clair River RAP. Generally, the management plan is consistent with, and complements, the St. Clair River RAP.
- **Canadian Recommendations:** While the document reflects the Canadian perspective on the Lake St. Clair watershed, including programs and initiatives, it does not include Canadian recommendations. These will be developed separately by the Canadian agency participants in consultation with local stakeholders.

- **Binational Recommendations:** Some issues discussed in the management plan are binational in orientation. Developing binational recommendations requires extended discussions between the U.S. and Canadian federal and state/provincial agencies and at this time, is beyond the scope and timeframe of the management plan. Collaboration on binational issues has been initiated within the context of the Four Agency Framework discussed earlier and is expected to continue in this manner leading to binational recommendations.
- **U.S. Recommendations:** The management plan includes 110 comprehensive management plan recommendations for the U.S. portion of the Lake St. Clair watershed. In most cases, no single entity has complete responsibility and/or authority to implement recommendations in total. Successful implementation of recommendations will likely require both intergovernmental and interagency collaborative effort to develop strategic plans by and across issue areas to define work plans within the context of watershed functions and processes and agency programs and authorities; link watershed wide local, state and federal priorities; and determine funding sources and implementation participants.

The Management Plan as a Catalyst for Action

Completing the management plan is neither the beginning nor the end of collective efforts to protect and restore Lake St. Clair and its watershed. As the following chapters make clear, there are already in place a strong array of programs, policies and initiatives to build on in implementing the management plan recommendations. However, beyond these existing efforts there is no funding specifically dedicated to implementing the plan. However, much can still be accomplished within the context of existing programs and funding sources but the complexity of the issues and large array of available public programs and funding sources requires a dedicated and collaborative effort .

Ultimately, the document's greatest value will be its credibility within the Lake St. Clair community and its ability to secure that community's ownership of it. With credibility and ownership, the document will continue to elevate Lake St. Clair's profile, both locally and within the broader Great Lakes system, and generate the commitment and resources to implement the plan.

In brief, the challenge before us is to utilize the management plan as a catalyst for action and a foundation for building an effective, long-term management strategy that can leverage and focus existing efforts, while identifying new authorities and resources needed to restore and protect the Lake St. Clair watershed.