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## OVERVIEW

### What is the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement?

The Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) is an agreement between Canada and the United States, first signed in 1972. It contributes to the quality of life of millions of Canadians by identifying shared priorities and coordinating actions to restore and protect the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes.

In amending the Agreement in 2012, the Governments of Canada and the United States have committed to a shared vision of a healthy and prosperous Great Lakes region in which the waters of the Great Lakes, through their sound management, use, and enjoyment, provide benefits to present and future generations. To this end, Canada and the United States recognize the importance of taking action, resolving existing environmental issues, and anticipating and preventing future problems.

Through the GLWQA, Canada and the United States, in consultation and cooperation with other

levels of government, First Nations and Métis organizations, businesses, non-governmental entities, and the public will develop programs, technologies and other measures necessary to better understand the Great Lakes ecosystem, and to restore and protect water quality and ecosystem health.

To view specific commitments, objectives and actions to address environmental issues affecting the Lakes, see the annex links below:

- [Annex 1:](#) Areas of Concern
- [Annex 2:](#) Lakewide Management
- [Annex 3:](#) Chemicals of Mutual Concern
- [Annex 4:](#) Nutrients
- [Annex 5:](#) Discharges from Vessels
- [Annex 6:](#) Aquatic Invasive Species
- [Annex 7:](#) Habitat and Species
- [Annex 8:](#) Groundwater
- [Annex 9:](#) Climate Change Impacts
- [Annex 10:](#) Science

For more information:

- [A Renewed Commitment to Action: The 2012 Agreement.](#)
- [History of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.](#)

## A Renewed Commitment to Action: The 2012 Agreement

Through the 2012 Agreement, Canada and the United States have established a shared vision and common objectives and commitments to science, governance and action that will help to restore and protect Great Lakes water quality and ecosystem health.

Both countries have considered input from other governmental and non-governmental organizations and various stakeholders to create a forward-thinking agreement that commits the two countries to action on current challenges while also expanding the list of issues to be addressed.

Canada and the United States have updated the agreement's goals and committed to developing and reporting on environmental indicators that will allow Canadians to assess

how the Great Lakes are responding in relation to the following:

- Providing a source of safe, high-quality drinking water;
- Allowing for unrestricted swimming and other recreational use;
- Allowing for unrestricted human consumption of the fish and wildlife;
- Supporting healthy and productive habitats to sustain our native species;
- Being free from pollutants that could harm people, wildlife or organisms;
- Being free from nutrients that promote unsightly algae or toxic blooms;
- Being free from aquatic invasive species;
- Being free from the harmful impacts of contaminated groundwater;
- Being free from other substances, materials or conditions that may negatively affect the Great Lakes.

The 2012 Agreement is:

### **Comprehensive:** NEW annexes for addressing priority challenges

While upholding and modernizing commitments made in the past, the 2012 Agreement commits Canada and the United States to tackling other priority issues facing the Great Lakes. The agreement has expanded the range of environmental issues to be addressed to include:

- **Aquatic Invasive Species:** a new annex that outlines commitments to preventing the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species.
- **Habitat and Species:** a new annex that outlines commitments to preventing the further loss of habitat and species, and to providing valuable ecosystem services.
- **Climate Change Impacts:** a new annex that outlines commitments to considering climate change impacts in order to enhance the long-term effectiveness of Great Lakes management strategies.

## Action-oriented: establishing clear commitments

The 2012 Agreement commits the parties to short-term and long-term actions, including:

- Developing a nearshore assessment and management framework **within three years**;
- Developing achievable, science-based phosphorus reduction targets for Lake Erie **within three years** in order to take action in combating the algae issue;
- **Within five years**, Canada and the United States will develop binational phosphorus-reduction strategies for Lake Erie and detailed domestic action plans to meet objectives for phosphorus concentrations, meet loading targets and divide the phosphorus loads between the countries;
- Developing and implementing an early detection and rapid response system, **within two years**, in order to identify quickly and take action on new threats of invasive species;
- Developing, **within two years**, lake-wide habitat and species protection and restoration conservation strategies for each of the Great Lakes;
- Developing, **within two years**, a baseline report on all relevant and available groundwater science in recognition of the important role that groundwater plays in overall water quality;
- Reporting on progress through a comprehensive Progress Report **every three years**;
- Convening a Great Lakes Summit **every three years**, to discuss and receive public input on trends in environmental quality and progress in implementing the 2012 Agreement.

## Effective: enhancing transparency and accountability

The 2012 Agreement outlines measures for stronger transparency and accountability, by:

- Increasing public and stakeholder engagement;
- Establishing a Great Lakes Public Forum to present, discuss and receive public input on trends in environmental quality, progress in implementing the 2012 Agreement, and future priorities;
- Creating the Canada–United States Great Lakes Executive Committee with participation from federal, state, tribal, provincial and municipal governments, First Nations, Métis, watershed management agencies, and other local public agencies, in order to coordinate action and to advise the parties on implementation of the Agreement.

## **Modernized:** reflecting current knowledge and understanding

Approaches to environmental management and our understanding of the ecosystem have evolved since the agreement was last amended in 1987. The 2012 Agreement reflects these advances by including a new focus on nearshore water quality and adaptive management approaches.

## **Forward-thinking:** preventing new problems

With the 2012 Agreement, Canada and the United States have devised a progressive and forward-thinking plan of action. The focus is on taking necessary actions to resolve problems that already exist, and anticipating and preventing new environmental problems.

## History of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement

Canada and the United States have a long history of working together to restore and protect the Great Lakes. Over the years, the challenges facing the Great Lakes have changed, and so too has the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) in order to effectively address current and future challenges.

### 1960s

During the 1960s, water quality issues in the Great Lakes first became a public concern. Lake Erie in particular was perceived to be “dying” because too much phosphorus was getting into the lake, causing massive algal blooms that were robbing the water of oxygen, killing fish and disrupting the food web. By the late 1960s, Canada and the United States were in agreement that action was needed.

### 1970s

The original 1972 Agreement focused primarily on reducing algae. Both nations agreed that a coordinated approach to limiting phosphorus inputs was the key to controlling excessive algal growth. Actions taken in support of the GLWQA reduced excess algae growth. Phosphorus levels in the Great Lakes declined significantly during the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, this was an unprecedented success in achieving environmental results and demonstrating the value of binational cooperation.

In 1978, the Agreement was revised to reflect a broadened goal “to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem.”

While reaffirming and building upon the 1972 Agreement, the 1978 Agreement introduced the “ecosystem approach,” a concept for identifying, managing and preventing environmental problems around the Great Lakes. This approach recognized the interconnectedness of all components of the environment and the need for an integrated perspective in addressing human health and environmental quality issues. Through the GLWQA, Canada and the United States were early adopters of the ecosystem approach, and continue to be guided by it today.

The 1978 Agreement included a new focus on toxic substances in the Great Lakes ecosystem. Canada and the United States have taken action to reduce the release of toxic chemicals into the environment, resulting in significant decreases in the levels of toxic substances within the Great Lakes ecosystem.

## 1980s

The Agreement was amended again in 1987, and the concept of Areas of Concern was introduced. These are the most severely degraded locations within the Great Lakes. Through the 1987 GLWQA, Canada and the United States committed to identify specific impairments such as fish and wildlife consumption restrictions, undesirable algae or beach closings, and to restore the ecosystem within these areas.

## 2012

The Agreement was amended in 2012 to better identify, manage and prevent current and emerging environmental issues affecting the Great Lakes.

Engaging citizens, provinces, municipalities, Aboriginal peoples, industry, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders was essential for successfully developing an inclusive agreement with the United States.

Cooperating and consulting with individuals and organizations is now critical to moving forward to implement Canada's commitments under the Agreement.

Often cited as one of the most forward-thinking diplomatic achievements for the environment, the Agreement has served as a model for international agreements to protect and restore environments elsewhere in the world.

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