



# At a Glance

## Evaluation of the Freshwater Action Plan: Great Lakes Protection Initiative

### About the program

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Announced in Budget 2017, the Freshwater Action Plan is funded at \$70.5 million and provides a framework to advance ECCC's programming to protect and restore freshwater quality in the Great Lakes and the Lake Winnipeg Basin from Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 to 2018 to FY 2021 to 2022. The funding is divided between the Great Lakes Protection Initiative (\$44.84 million) and the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program (\$25.7 million). In the Great Lakes context, the Freshwater Action Plan funds are an addition to ongoing and existing ECCC resources for protection and restoration of the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes Protection Initiative investments focused on supporting a number of Canada's commitments under the Canada-United States Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, with the goal of improving Great Lakes water quality and ecosystem health in six particular program areas:

- Preventing toxic and nuisance algae
- Assessing and enhancing the resilience of Great Lakes and coastal wetlands
- Evaluating and identifying at-risk nearshore waters
- Reducing releases of harmful chemicals
- Engaging Indigenous peoples in addressing Great Lakes issues
- Increasing public engagement through citizen science

### What the evaluation found

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The evaluation found that the Great Lakes Protection Initiative was aligned with the priorities of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. New program areas supported through this funding were integrated in the existing governance structures for the Great Lakes, including the process for administering Grants and Contributions (G&C) and benefited from collaborations from many governments and non-government stakeholders for monitoring and restoration activities. Although the success of the Great Lakes Protection Initiative relies in part on the collaboration of many partners, there are opportunities to strengthen collaborations with other federal departments and other partners.



The Great Lakes Protection Initiative underspent its budget for the period covered by the evaluation, which was attributed by the Program mostly to delays in staffing. With respect to project management, systems are in place to ensure efficient management of program activities and G&Cs. Collaborations with other stakeholders, such as provincial and non-government organizations, also lead to efficiency by leveraging external resources, expertise and data. An opportunity for improvement was identified with respect to the need of enhancing the program G&Cs reporting templates to include more quantitative indicators.

In terms of performance, program information showed that the Great Lakes Protection Initiative improved nutrients monitoring and understanding of the nutrients and algal blooms in the Great Lakes, particularly Lake Erie. The Great Lakes Protection Initiative G&Cs supported projects for the purposes of demonstrating innovative approaches to reduce phosphorus loadings, or to developing technologies to reduce loadings, such as devices that remove phosphorus from manure and wastewater. These projects are expected to have impacts in the short and medium terms. Despite the success of the Great Lakes Protection Initiative in these efforts, it will take many years of significant concerted effort by all partners to achieve Canada's phosphorus load reduction target for Lake Erie.

Through collaborations with many partners, the Great Lakes Protection Initiative supported the implementation of the Nearshore Assessment Framework in the Canadian nearshore waters of the Great Lakes, by coordinating the delineation and classification of the waters in the nearshore areas of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, and evaluating the conditions of these nearshore areas to identify areas of high ecological value and those under high stress. The approach used was deemed as both efficient and effective. At the time of the evaluation, two reports were completed (Lake Erie and Lake Ontario), and results are expected to be used identify priorities for action by all levels of government, stakeholders and the public. The assessment of the ecological value component was not completed at the time of the evaluation, but will be expected to be done for the final integrated report which will include an assessment of Lake Huron.

The evaluation found that investments to reduce releases of harmful chemicals were modest and focused on assessing what needs to be done in the Great Lakes and that has not been initiated through other national programs. Specifically, funds were used to identify what substances are present in the Great Lakes, in what products and at what levels. Funding supported the identification of priorities for actions to reduce legacy toxins as well as emerging ones, and the development of innovative approaches to reduce releases of harmful chemicals. Progress was deemed on track.

With respect to Indigenous engagement, in addition to supporting Indigenous participation in the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement committees, the program provided funding to support projects led by Indigenous organizations, governments and communities, including awareness-raising projects, monitoring activities and restoration work. Significant efforts were made by ECCC to engage Indigenous government and community representatives in the

development of programming to support Indigenous capacity to restore and protect the Great Lakes before launching the initial call for proposals. Opportunities for improvement were identified with respect to better aligning parameters of the G&Cs with the environmental priorities of Indigenous organizations and governments, the need for enhanced support for indigenous applicants, and further engagement of Indigenous participants prior to the funding decisions.

## Recommendations and management response

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Two recommendations are directed to the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Strategic Policy Branch (SPB), as the senior departmental official responsible for the Great Lakes Protection Initiative.

**Recommendation 1: identify and implement best practices to enhance and strengthen Indigenous engagement and participation in the Great Lakes Protection Initiative's G&C programs and projects.**

**Management response:** The Regional Director General – Ontario will identify best practices to enhance and strengthen Indigenous engagement and participation in the Great Lakes Protection Initiative G&C programs and projects. The Regional Director General – Ontario will implement these best practices in collaboration with the G&C Centre of Expertise in the Corporate Services and Finance Branch as required.

**Recommendation 2: review grants and contributions monitoring tools to further incorporate quantitative performance indicators where applicable.**

**Management response:** The Regional Director General – Ontario will review G&C monitoring tools to further incorporate quantitative performance indicators in the Great Lakes Protection Initiative projects, where applicable. If necessary, the Regional Director General – Ontario will seek changes to the reporting template for recipients.

## About the evaluation

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The evaluation was conducted during FY 2020-21, concurrently with an evaluation of the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program. This evaluation covered the period between FY 2017 to 2018 and FY 2020 to 2021, and included activities in four of the Great Lakes Protection Initiative program areas - preventing toxic and nuisance algae, evaluating and identifying at-risk nearshore waters, reducing releases of harmful chemicals and engaging Indigenous Peoples in addressing Great Lakes issues. The objectives of the evaluation were to examine the extent to which activities are governed collaboratively, resources have been used efficiently and performance information was used to inform decision-making.