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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-999T](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs

Why GAO Did This Study

The five Great Lakes, which comprise the largest system of freshwater in the world, are threatened on many environmental fronts. To address the extent of progress made in restoring the Great Lakes Basin, which includes the lakes and surrounding area, GAO (1) identified the federal and state environmental programs operating in the basin and the funding devoted to them, (2) evaluated the restoration strategies used and how they are coordinated, and (3) assessed overall environmental progress made in the basin restoration effort.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommended in its April 2003 report that the Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- ensure that the Great Lakes National Program Office fulfills its coordination responsibilities and develop an overarching Great Lakes strategy; and
- develop environmental indicators and a monitoring system for the Great Lakes Basin that can be used to measure overall restoration progress.

EPA generally agreed with GAO's conclusions that better planning, coordination, monitoring and the development of indicators are needed, and stated it would provide the Congress, GAO, and the Office of Management and Budget with a formal response to the report recommendations at a later date.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-999T.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or John Wanska at (312) 220-7628.

GREAT LAKES

A Coordinated Strategic Plan and Monitoring System Are Needed to Achieve Restoration Goals

What GAO Found

There are 148 federal and 51 state programs funding environmental restoration activities in the Great Lakes Basin. Most of these programs are nationwide or statewide programs that do not specifically focus on the Great Lakes. However, several programs specifically address environmental conditions in the Great Lakes. GAO identified 33 federal Great Lakes specific programs, and states funded 17 additional unique Great Lakes specific programs. Although Great Lakes funding is not routinely tracked for many of these programs, we identified a total of about \$3.7 billion in basin-specific projects for fiscal years 1992 through 2001.

GAO identified several Great Lakes environmental strategies being used at the binational, federal, and state levels. These strategies are not coordinated or unified in a fashion comparable to other large restoration projects, such as the South Florida ecosystem. Without an overarching plan for these strategies, it is difficult to determine overall progress. The Water Quality Act of 1987 charged EPA's Great Lakes National Program Office with the responsibility for coordinating federal actions for improving the Great Lakes' water quality, however, it has not fully exercised this authority to this point.

With available information, it is not possible to comprehensively assess restoration progress in the Great Lakes. Current indicators rely on limited quantitative data and subjective judgments to determine whether conditions are improving, such as whether fish are safe to eat. The ultimate success of an ongoing binational effort to develop a set of overall indicators for the Great Lakes is uncertain because it relies on the resources voluntarily provided by several organizations. Further, no date for completing a final list of indicators has been established.

Great Lakes: Largest Body of Freshwater in the World



Sources: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and GAO.