Why GAO Did This Study

The Great Lakes contain about 84 percent of North America’s surface freshwater and provide economic and recreational benefits in the Great Lakes Basin. However, the Great Lakes face significant stresses—such as toxic pollution—that have caused ecological and economic damage to the region.

Approximately $1.3 billion has been appropriated to the GLRI, created in fiscal year 2010, which an interagency Task Force of 11 federal agencies, chaired by the EPA Administrator, oversees. In 2010, the Task Force issued an Action Plan for fiscal years 2010 to 2014 to develop a comprehensive approach to restoring the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. GAO was asked to review GLRI progress. GAO analyzed the Action Plan’s scope that may affect the GLRI’s long-term success.

What GAO Found

The Task Force agencies use the Action Plan to implement the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and use an interagency process to enter into agreements among themselves to identify GLRI projects and with other stakeholders to implement GLRI projects. The Action Plan includes guidance for implementing the GLRI in five focus areas (such as invasive species and habitat and wildlife protection and restoration) that encompass the most significant environmental problems in the Great Lakes. Each focus area includes, among other things, long-term goals, objectives to be achieved by fiscal year 2014, and 28 measures of progress that have annual targets for fiscal years 2010 to 2014.

EPA uses the Action Plan’s measures to assess GLRI progress. However, its methods may not produce comprehensive and useful assessments of GLRI progress for several reasons. Among them, some of the goals and objectives do not link to any measures and, as a result, it is unclear how EPA will be able to assess progress toward them. In addition, some measures track actions that may not lead to the desired GLRI goal. For example, one measure tracks the reduction in concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) in fish as part of the goal to lift all restrictions on consumption of Great Lakes fish. However, stakeholders reported that the measure is too narrow and that mercury and other contaminants need to be addressed as well. Consequently, reducing PCB concentrations in fish is not likely to lead to the desired result of lifting all Great Lakes fish consumption restrictions. Without useful measures, EPA may not be able to determine that GLRI efforts are producing the desired results.

In spring 2013, the Task Force agencies issued two reports about GLRI progress in fiscal years 2010 and 2011, which state whether the targets for the Action Plan’s 28 measures were being met (e.g., 15 of 28 measures met or exceeded in fiscal year 2011), but the reports include few specific examples of progress. As a result, GAO sought further insights into such progress by surveying nonfederal GLRI stakeholders. Overall, 87 percent of respondents cited at least one example of how one or more of their projects had, or was expected to, benefit the Great Lakes ecosystem. GAO and others have reported that quantifying overall environmental problems in the Great Lakes. Each focus area includes, among other things, long-term goals, objectives to be achieved by fiscal year 2014, and 28 measures of progress that have annual targets for fiscal years 2010 to 2014.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EPA help ensure more comprehensive and useful GLRI progress assessments and account for factors outside of the Action Plan’s scope that may affect the GLRI’s long-term success. EPA generally agreed with GAO’s recommendations.

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