

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-529](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Water releases from Lake Ontario into the St. Lawrence River are determined by a set of regulatory rules and criteria called Plan 2014—issued pursuant to IJC’s Supplementary Order of Approval and the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909. The IJC—a binational commission—developed and issued the Plan and Order with the concurrence of the United States and Canada. The rules affect a variety of users of the waterway, including ecosystems, hydropower, and municipal and industrial water use.

After flooding from the lake and river in 2017, GAO was asked to examine the process IJC used to develop and evaluate Plan 2014 and how IJC has addressed stakeholder concerns. This report examines (1) the extent to which IJC’s process to develop and select Plan 2014 was consistent with essential elements of risk-informed decision-making, (2) actions IJC has taken to communicate with stakeholders about its implementation of Plan 2014 and stakeholder concerns regarding IJC’s communication, and (3) stakeholder concerns about Plan 2014 and the extent to which IJC has developed a process to assess and adjust Plan 2014. GAO reviewed Plan 2014 and other IJC documents, interviewed IJC and federal officials and a nongeneralizable sample of 14 stakeholders, selected for a variety of user interests and stakeholder types.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that the U.S. Section of the IJC work with its Canadian counterpart to ensure that the communication plan aligns with best practices and the adaptive management strategy fully incorporates key elements. IJC agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-20-529](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

July 2020

LAKE ONTARIO-ST. LAWRENCE RIVER PLAN

Improved Communication and Adaptive Management Strategy Could Help Address Stakeholder Concerns

What GAO Found

The International Joint Commission’s (IJC) process for developing and selecting the Lake Ontario-St. Lawrence River Plan 2014 (Plan 2014) was generally consistent with relevant essential elements of risk-informed decision-making. During the 18-year process, IJC took steps to define objectives and performance measures to be used in its decision-making, identify various options, assess uncertainties like climate change, and engage with stakeholders, among other steps. These steps are all essential elements of risk-informed decision making.

Plan 2014 Affects Various Users of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, Including (from Left to Right) Commercial Navigation, Coastal Development, and Recreational Boating, Including Marinas



Source: GAO. | GAO-20-529

IJC uses two mechanisms—a communications committee and a strategic communication plan—and a variety of methods—such as its website, social media, and public meetings—to communicate with stakeholders about its implementation of Plan 2014. Nevertheless, 12 of the 14 stakeholders GAO interviewed expressed concerns about IJC’s communication. GAO found that IJC’s strategic communication plan and related documents partially align with best practices. For example, the communication plan and related documents do not comprehensively identify target audiences or include mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication efforts. Updating its strategic communication plan to align with best practices and principles for risk communication could help IJC ensure improved stakeholder communication.

Of the 14 stakeholders interviewed, nine expressed concerns about the rules and criteria in Plan 2014 and 10 expressed concerns about its implementation. For example, seven stakeholders told us that they do not believe that the Plan allows IJC to act proactively in anticipation of future water conditions. IJC has taken initial steps to develop an adaptive management process that may help address stakeholder concerns and approved a long-term adaptive management strategy in March 2020. However, the document does not fully incorporate the key elements and essential characteristics of an adaptive management process that could help IJC transparently and effectively assess Plan 2014 and adjust future actions to achieve the plan’s objectives. For example, the Plan does not fully incorporate a communication strategy for engaging stakeholders throughout the process or information on how IJC will determine if adjustments to the Plan’s rules and criteria are warranted.