

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-797](#), a report to congressional requesters

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 the GLRI. This report examines (1) how the GLRI is implemented by the Task Force agencies and other stakeholders, (2) the methods that EPA has in place to assess GLRI progress, (3) the progress identified by the Task Force agencies and nonfederal stakeholders, and (4) the views of nonfederal stakeholders on factors, if any, that may affect or limit GLRI progress. GAO analyzed the Action Plan, surveyed 205 non-federal recipients of GLRI funding, and interviewed Task Force agency officials and nonfederal stakeholders.

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.

View [GAO-13-797](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

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GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE

Further Actions Would Result in More Useful Assessments and Help Address Factors That Limit Progress

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 Great Lakes restoration progress is difficult, that the environmental conditions of each lake are unique, and, according to a 2006 U.N. report, it is often impossible to attribute specific environmental changes to specific projects or programs.

In response to GAO's survey, among the factors respondents most often cited as potentially limiting GLRI progress are several outside the scope of the Action Plan, such as inadequate infrastructure for wastewater or stormwater and the effects of climate change. These factors could negatively affect GLRI restoration efforts. For example, as a result of climate change, warming water temperatures can lead to increased numbers of aquatic invasive species and a decline in native ones, a GLRI focus area. The Action Plan touches on these factors but does not state how they will be addressed. In 2012, EPA took steps to incorporate climate change considerations into a small number of GLRI projects but has yet to decide if the GLRI will consider climate change impacts on all GLRI projects. Without addressing these factors in the next Action Plan, EPA will not be able to more fully account for their impacts on GLRI restoration efforts.