



Testimony  
Before the Subcommittee on Water  
Resources and Environment,  
Committee on Transportation and  
Infrastructure, House of Representatives

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# GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE

## Some Information on Projects and Progress Made Available to Congress and the Public

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# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-841T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Great Lakes, which contain much of North America's freshwater supply, provide economic and recreational benefits to millions of people. They face significant stresses, however, that have caused ecological and economic damage. Decades of industrial activity in the region, for example, left a legacy of contamination that resulted in the United States and Canada identifying, since 1987, 43 Areas of Concern.

The GLRI was created in 2010 to, according to EPA, accelerate efforts to protect and restore the Great Lakes. It is overseen by a Task Force of 11 federal agencies that is chaired by the EPA. EPA was directed, in a conference report, to develop a restoration action plan, establish a process to ensure monitoring and reporting on progress, and provide detailed yearly accomplishments.

This testimony is based on GAO reports issued in September 2013 and July 2015. It focuses on (1) GLRI funding, action plans, and reports; (2) the process used to identify GLRI work and funding; and (3) information available about GLRI project activities and results. For the 2015 report, GAO reviewed a sample of 19 GLRI projects funded by the five Task Force agencies that received the majority of GLRI funds, among other things.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommended in 2013 that EPA improve assessments of GLRI progress, among other things. EPA agreed and has taken several actions. GAO is not making any recommendations in this testimony.

View [GAO-15-841T](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov).

September 30, 2015

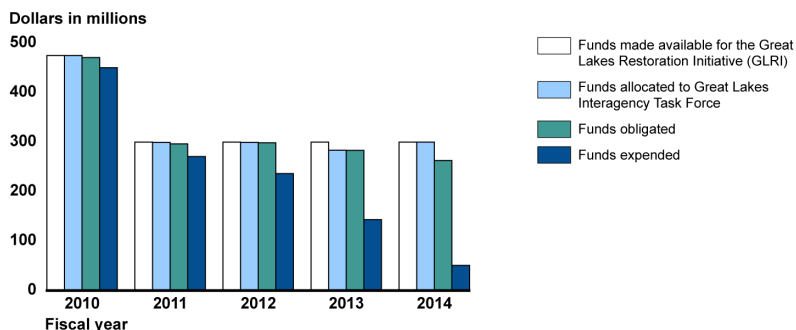
## GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE

### Some Information on Projects and Progress Made Available to Congress and the Public

## What GAO Found

As GAO reported in July 2015, of the \$1.68 billion in federal funds made available for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) in fiscal years 2010 through 2014, nearly all had been allocated as of January 2015. Of the \$1.66 billion allocated, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the other 10 Great Lakes Interagency Task Force (Task Force) agencies expended \$1.15 billion for 2,123 projects (see fig.).

### Status of GLRI Funds, FY 2010-2014



Source: GAO analysis of EPA's January 2015 GLRI financial management update reports. | GAO-15-841T

Task Force agencies can either conduct work themselves or enter into financial agreements, such as grants, cooperative agreements, or contracts with others, such as federal entities; state, local, and tribal entities; nongovernmental organizations; and academic institutions. To guide restoration work, EPA and the Task Force have developed two consecutive multiyear restoration action plans. EPA also created a process to ensure monitoring and reporting on the progress of the GLRI, and EPA and the Task Force issued three accomplishment reports.

The process to identify each agency's GLRI work and funding has evolved to emphasize interagency discussion. In fiscal year 2012, the Task Force created subgroups to discuss and identify work on three issues: cleaning up severely degraded locations, called Areas of Concern; preventing and controlling invasive, aquatic species that cause extensive ecological and economic damage; and reducing nutrient runoff from agricultural areas. EPA officials said that the Task Force created additional subgroups to identify all GLRI work and funding in 2015.

In July 2015, GAO found that the Task Force has made some information about GLRI project activities and results available to Congress and the public in three accomplishment reports and on its website. In addition, the individual Task Force agencies collect information on activities and results, although this information is not collected and reported by EPA. Of the 19 projects GAO reviewed, 8 reported results directly linked to restoration, such as improved methods for capturing sea lamprey, an invasive species that can kill up to about 40 pounds of fish in its lifetime. The remaining 11 reported results that can be indirectly linked to restoration; that is, the results may contribute to restoration over time. These included results such as simulations and data for helping decision makers make better restoration decisions in light of climate change, as well as education and outreach tools to increase awareness of invasive species.



Chairman Gibbs, Ranking Member Napolitano, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today as you consider the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and its role in restoring the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. Millions of people in the United States and Canada depend on the Great Lakes—the largest system of freshwater in the world, containing much of North America’s freshwater supply—as a source of drinking water, recreation, and economic livelihood. Over the last several decades, the Great Lakes Basin, including the five Great Lakes—Superior, Michigan, Huron, Ontario, and Erie—has proven vulnerable to the effects of toxic and other pollutants resulting from industrial and agricultural activities. In addition, more than 180 nonnative aquatic species have become established in the Great Lakes, some of which have caused extensive ecological and economic damage. The discovery of Asian carp near waterways connected to the lakes threatens to increase this problem.<sup>1</sup> The GLRI was created in fiscal year 2010, after the President’s fiscal year 2010 budget request included a new interagency initiative to accelerate Great Lakes restoration by addressing regional issues, such as water quality contamination and invasive species that continue to threaten the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem. It is overseen by the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force (Task Force), which is chaired by the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and made up of senior officials from EPA, nine federal departments, and the Council on Environmental Quality.<sup>2</sup> According to the

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<sup>1</sup>The term Asian carp refers collectively to four species of carp—including bighead and silver carp—that are native to Asia and were first introduced into the United States in 1963. Their rapid expansion and population increase can decrease populations of native aquatic species, in part by consuming vast areas of aquatic plants that are important as food and spawning and nursery habitats.

<sup>2</sup>The Task Force was created by Executive Order 13340, Establishment of Great Lakes Interagency Task Force and Promotion of a Regional Collaboration of National Significance for the Great Lakes, 69 Fed. Reg. 29043 (May 20, 2004). The Task Force originally consisted of the Administrator of the EPA, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the Secretary of Transportation, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Secretary of the Army, and the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality. Another department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and its Secretary, were added later.

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Task Force, the GLRI was created to accelerate efforts to protect and restore the Great Lakes.

When Congress made funds available for the GLRI in fiscal year 2010,<sup>3</sup> the conference report accompanying the appropriations act directed EPA to take several actions, including to (1) develop a comprehensive, multiyear restoration action plan for fiscal years 2011-2014, (2) establish a process that ensures monitoring and reporting on progress of the GLRI, and (3) provide detailed yearly program accomplishments beginning in 2011.<sup>4</sup> EPA is authorized to transfer GLRI funds to any federal agency to carry out activities in support of the program. EPA enters into agreements with the Task Force agencies identifying the funds to be transferred and describing the work to be done. To use GLRI funds on restoration activities, Task Force agencies conduct work themselves or enter into financial agreements, such as grants, cooperative agreements, or contracts, with other groups to perform specific projects. Recipients of GLRI funds can include federal entities; state, local, or tribal entities; nongovernmental organizations; academic institutions; and others such as agricultural producers.

My statement today focuses on (1) GLRI funding, action plans to guide the activities of the GLRI, process to ensure monitoring and reporting, and accomplishment reports; (2) the process used to identify GLRI work and funding; and (3) information available about GLRI project activities and results. This testimony is based on reports we issued in September 2013 and July 2015.<sup>5</sup> To conduct our work, we reviewed GLRI agreements between the Task Force agencies and agencies' policies and guidance on financial agreements. We also interviewed officials representing the Task Force agencies. We focused primarily on the five Task Force agencies that received the majority—about 85 percent—of GLRI funds made available in fiscal years 2010 through 2014. These agencies were EPA, Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Oceanic

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<sup>3</sup>Department of the Interior—Appropriation, Pub. L. No. 111-88, 123 Stat. 2904, 2938 (2009).

<sup>4</sup>H. R. Rep. No. 111-316, at 111 (2009).

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative: Further Actions Would Result in More Useful Assessments and Help Address Factors That Limit Progress*, [GAO-13-797](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2013) and *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative: Improved Data Collection and Reporting Would Enhance Oversight*, [GAO-15-526](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 21, 2015).

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and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps). To examine information available about GLRI project activities and results for the 2015 report, we analyzed GLRI accomplishment reports, the GLRI website, and project documents for a nonprobability sample of 19 projects funded by the five Task Force agencies.<sup>6</sup> In most cases, EPA, FWS, NOAA, and NRCS require their grant recipients to submit quarterly, semiannual, or annual progress reports, and quarterly or annual financial reports, consistent with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) circulars in effect at the time of the agreements.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Task Force agencies that used contracts—the Corps and NOAA—require their contractors to submit progress reports. More details on the scope and methodology for this work can be found in each of our issued reports.

The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

The Great Lakes Basin covers approximately 300,000 square miles, encompassing Michigan and parts of Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and the Canadian province of

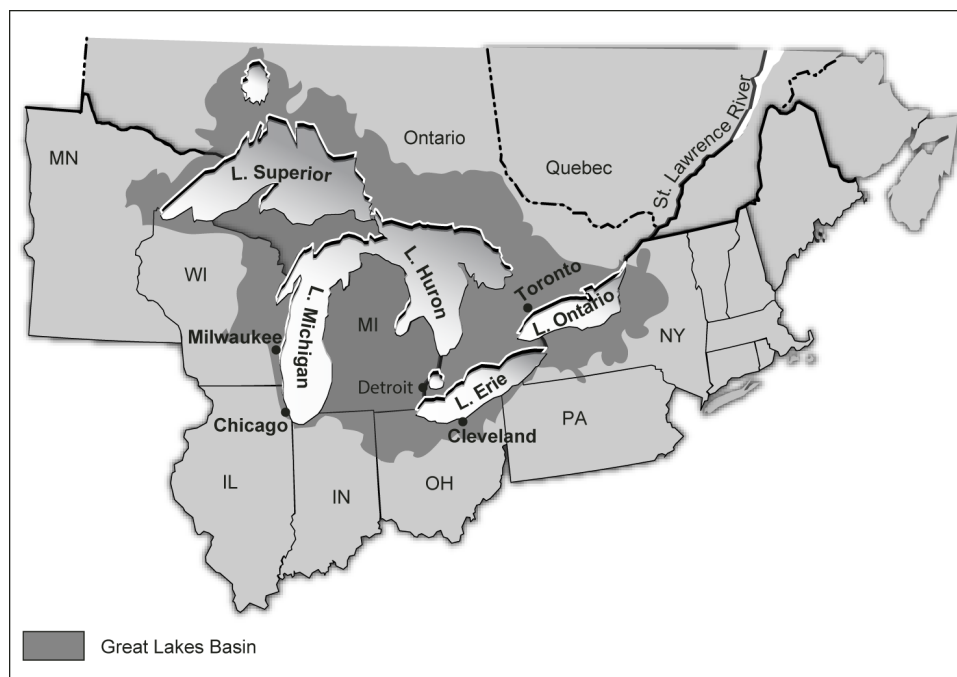
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<sup>6</sup>This nonprobability sample provides examples of both projects with typical and large funding amounts from a range of recipients, and is not representative of all GLRI projects.

<sup>7</sup>OMB Circular A-102, Grants and Cooperative Agreements With State and Local Governments (Oct. 7, 1994; further amended Aug. 29, 1997) and OMB Circular A-110, Uniform Administrative Requirements for Grants and Other Agreements with Institutions of Higher Education, Hospitals and Other Non-Profit Organizations (Nov. 19, 1993; further amended Sept. 30, 1999). In December 2013, OMB consolidated its grants management circulars into a single uniform guidance document, the *Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards* (Uniform Guidance), to streamline its grants management guidance, promote consistency among grantees, and reduce administrative burden on nonfederal entities. In December 2014, OMB, along with grant-making agencies, issued a joint interim final rule implementing OMB's Uniform Guidance for new grant awards made on or after December 26, 2014. Because we reviewed GLRI projects awarded before that date, we used OMB's previous circulars in our review. OMB circulars in effect during the first 4 years of the GLRI are available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/circulars\\_default/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/circulars_default/).

Ontario (see fig. 1), as well as lands that are home to more than 40 Native American tribes. It includes the five Great Lakes and a large land area that extends beyond the Great Lakes, including their watersheds, tributaries, and connecting channels.

**Figure 1: Area Comprising the Great Lakes Basin**



Sources: GAO, Map Resources (map). | GAO-15-841T

Numerous environmental stressors threaten the health of the Great Lakes and adjacent land within the Great Lakes Basin. Decades of industrial activity in the region have left a legacy of contamination, such as from polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), in the sediments that make up the beds of rivers and harbors in the Great Lakes Basin. In 1987, the United States and Canada identified a list of 43 severely degraded locations in the Great Lakes Basin as Areas of Concern—26 of which are located entirely in the United States; 5, shared by the United States and Canada; and 12,

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located entirely in Canada.<sup>8</sup> As of May 2015, 4 of the Areas of Concern located entirely in the United States had been delisted, or removed, from the binational list. In addition, the fertile soil in the surrounding states makes them highly productive agricultural areas, resulting in large amounts of nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen—as well as sediment, pesticides, and other chemicals—running off into the Great Lakes.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, large population centers on both sides of the U.S. and Canadian border use the Great Lakes to discharge wastewater from treatment plants, which also introduces nutrients into the Great Lakes. Even with progress in reducing the amount of phosphorus in the lakes in the 1970s, harmful algal blooms are once again threatening the Great Lakes Basin.<sup>10</sup>

The United States has long recognized the threats facing the Great Lakes and has developed agreements and programs to support restoration actions. For example, in 1972, the United States and Canada signed the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement to restore, protect, and enhance the water quality of the Great Lakes to promote the ecological health of the Great Lakes Basin. In addition, in 2002, the Great Lakes Legacy Act authorized EPA to carry out sediment remediation projects in the 31 Areas of Concern located entirely or partially in the United States, among other things.<sup>11</sup> In 2004, the Task Force agencies collaborated with governors, mayors, tribes, and nongovernmental organizations in the Great Lakes region in an effort referred to as the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration, which led to the development in 2005 of the *Great Lakes*

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<sup>8</sup>These areas are defined as “geographic areas where a change in the chemical, physical, or biological integrity of the area is sufficient to cause restrictions on fish and wildlife or drinking water consumption, or the loss of fish and wildlife habitat, among other conditions, or impair the area’s ability to support aquatic life.”

<sup>9</sup>Pollutants from these nonpoint sources remain leading causes of impairment to the nation’s waters. See GAO, *Clean Water Act: Changes Needed if Key EPA Program Is to Help Fulfill the Nation’s Water Quality Goals*, [GAO-14-80](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 5, 2013).

<sup>10</sup>These algal blooms are a result of increases in phosphorus and nitrogen entering the lakes from nonpoint sources of runoff from urban and rural areas. According to NOAA officials, while phosphorus is generally the primary nutrient that controls the amount of algae that will grow suspended in freshwater, nitrogen can also control algal growth. Increases in phosphorus or nitrogen can result in increases in algae, which can be detrimental to aquatic life by reducing the amount of sunlight and indirectly reducing the amount of available oxygen, among other things.

<sup>11</sup>Pub. L. No. 107-303, 116 Stat. 2355 (2002).

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*Regional Collaboration Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes.*<sup>12</sup> More than 1,500 individuals participated in this effort. In 2009, the President created the Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee to coordinate efforts to prevent Asian carp from spreading and becoming established.

Even with these actions, the Great Lakes are environmentally vulnerable. In 2009, the President proposed \$475 million in his fiscal year 2010 budget request for a new interagency initiative to accelerate the restoration of the Great Lakes. Specifically, the President requested that EPA and its federal partners coordinate state, tribal, local, and industry actions to protect, maintain, and restore the integrity of the Great Lakes. Most recently, in 2015, multiple bills to authorize the GLRI were introduced in the House and Senate. Some of these bills, if enacted, would authorize \$300 million to be appropriated annually to carry out the GLRI for fiscal years 2016 through 2020.

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## EPA Made Funding Available to a Range of Recipients, Guided Activities through a GLRI Action Plan, Created a Monitoring Process, and Issued Accomplishment Reports

When Congress made funds available for the GLRI in fiscal year 2010, the conference report accompanying the appropriations act directed EPA to develop a comprehensive, multiyear restoration action plan for fiscal years 2011 through 2014, to establish a process to ensure monitoring and reporting on the progress of the GLRI, and to provide detailed, yearly program accomplishments beginning in 2011.

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## GLRI Funding

As discussed in our July 2015 report,<sup>13</sup> in fiscal years 2010 through 2014, \$1.68 billion of federal funds was made available for the GLRI,<sup>14</sup> and as of

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<sup>12</sup>Great Lakes Regional Collaboration, *Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy to Restore and Protect the Great Lakes* (December 2005).

<sup>13</sup>[GAO-15-526](#).



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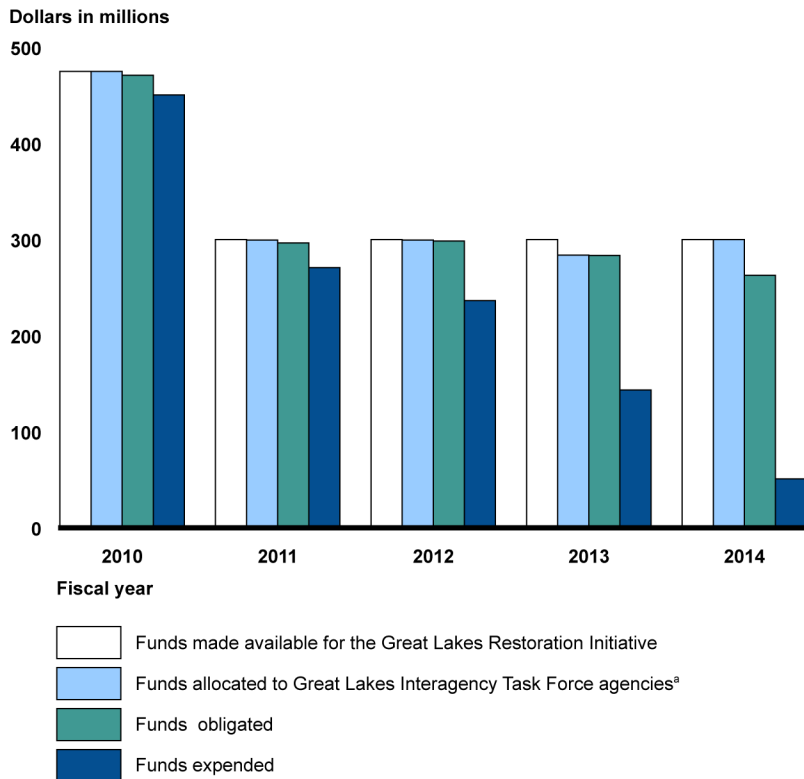
January 2015, EPA had allocated nearly all of the funds, about \$1.66 billion. Also, as of January 2015, Task Force agencies had expended \$1.15 billion for 2,123 projects (see fig. 2).<sup>15</sup> GLRI funds are available for obligation for the fiscal year the appropriation was made and the successive fiscal year. After these 2 fiscal years of availability, GLRI funds can be used for 7 additional years to expend and adjust those obligations.

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<sup>14</sup>GLRI funds were made available through appropriations and transfer authority. Transfer authority is statutory authority provided by Congress to transfer budget authority from one appropriation or fund account to another. In fiscal years 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2015, Congress did not provide appropriations for GLRI purposes. Instead, in those fiscal years, Congress provided EPA with transfer authority, up to a maximum amount, to undertake GLRI programs and projects. However, in fiscal years 2011 and 2013, Congress did provide EPA with specific appropriations for GLRI purposes. As such, this testimony will, hereinafter, use “made available” when referring to the maximum amount of transfer authority and/or appropriations provided for GLRI purposes.

<sup>15</sup>For budgeting purposes, an allocation means a delegation, authorized by law, by one agency of its authority to obligate budget authority and outlay funds to another agency, and it is made when one or more agencies share the administration of a program for which appropriations are made to only one of the agencies or to the President. For funds control purposes, an allocation is a further subdivision of an apportionment. Obligations are definite commitments that create a legal liability of the government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received, or a legal duty on the part of the United States that could mature into a legal liability by virtue of actions on the part of the other party beyond the control of the United States. Expenditures are the actual spending of money, that is the outlays that liquidate obligations. See GAO, A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process, [GAO-05-734SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2005).

**Figure 2: Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Funds Made Available, Allocated, Obligated, and Expended as of January 2015**



Source: GAO analysis of the Environmental Protection Agency's January 2015 Great Lakes Restoration Initiative financial management update reports. | GAO-15-841T

Notes: The fiscal years in this figure refer to the years in which the funds were made available for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI).

<sup>a</sup>The Great Lakes Interagency Task Force is chaired by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator and includes senior officials from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, State, and Transportation and the Council on Environmental Quality. EPA allocates GLRI funds to the other Task Force agencies responsible for carrying out GLRI work.

Task Force agencies conduct GLRI work themselves or by awarding funds to recipients through financial agreements, such as grants, cooperative agreements, or contracts. Potential recipients of GLRI funds include federal entities; state, local, or tribal entities; nongovernmental organizations; academic institutions; and others, such as for-profit entities, agricultural producers, or private landowners. A single GLRI project can involve multiple funding recipients. Table 1 shows the number of projects funded with GLRI funds made available in fiscal years 2010

through 2013 by the five agencies we reviewed in our 2015 report and type of recipient, as of July 2014. The type of GLRI funding recipients vary depending on the agency and financial agreements involved. For example, NOAA has entered into agreements with a variety of recipient types, with the exception of private landowners and agricultural producers. Funding recipients are responsible for reporting information to their funding agencies about the progress of their GLRI projects.

**Table 1: Number of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) Projects Funded by Five Agencies, by Type of Recipient as of July 2014**

Agency	Projects by recipient type				
	Federal entities <sup>a</sup>	State, local, or tribal entities	Nongovernmental organizations	Academic institutions	Other
Environmental Protection Agency	17	318	100	134	0
Fish and Wildlife Service	181	138	148	47	1 <sup>b</sup> 11 <sup>c</sup>
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	330	0	0	0	0
Natural Resources Conservation Service	22	17	5	2	1 <sup>b</sup> 18 <sup>d</sup>
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	53	42	30	45	3 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Total</b>	<b>603</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>5<sup>b</sup></b> <b>11<sup>c</sup></b> <b>18<sup>d</sup></b>

Source: GAO analysis of data from the Great Lakes Accountability System (GLAS) as of July 2014, and data on GLRI recipients from the Environmental Protection Agency, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. | GAO-15-841T

Notes: This table includes only those projects that were identified in GLAS as of July 2014 as funded with GLRI funds made available in fiscal years 2010 through 2013.

Recipients in this table are entities that received GLRI funds directly from the federal agencies.

Because projects in GLAS may have multiple recipients of different types, the same projects may be counted under multiple columns that cannot be added together to equal an agency's total number of projects.

<sup>a</sup>For GLRI projects categorized under the federal entities recipient type, the recipient may be the funding agency itself, other federal agencies to which they have provided funds, or an entity that was awarded a contract. We have included contracts in this category because contracts are used when the principal purpose is acquisition of property or services for the direct benefit or use of the federal government.

<sup>b</sup>For-profit entities.

<sup>c</sup>Private landowners.

<sup>d</sup>Agricultural producers.

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## GLRI Action Plans

As discussed in our September 2013 and July 2015 reports,<sup>16</sup> in response to the conference report's direction to develop a multiyear restoration action plan, in February 2010, the Task Force published the *Fiscal Years 2010 to 2014 Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan* (2010-2014 Action Plan) to guide the activities of the GLRI for those years.<sup>17</sup> The 2010-2014 Action Plan was organized into five focus areas that, according to the Task Force agencies, encompassed the most significant environmental problems in the Great Lakes: (1) toxic substances and Areas of Concern; (2) invasive species; (3) nearshore health and nonpoint source pollution; (4) habitat and wildlife protection and restoration; and (5) accountability, education, monitoring, evaluation, communication, and partnerships.

For each focus area, the 2010-2014 Action Plan included long-term goals, objectives to be completed within the 5-year period covered by the plan, and measures of progress—28 in total—that were designed to ensure that efforts are on track to meet the long-term goals. Each of the 28 measures included annual targets for fiscal years 2010 to 2014.<sup>18</sup> The Task Force issued an updated Action Plan for 2015 to 2019 (2015-2019 Action Plan) in September 2014 to guide the GLRI for those years.<sup>19</sup> The updated plan retains four of the focus areas of the 2010-2014 Action Plan, and the fifth focus area was modified and called “foundations for future restoration actions.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>[GAO-13-797](#) and [GAO-15-526](#).

<sup>17</sup>Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, *Fiscal Years 2010-2014 Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 21, 2010)

<sup>18</sup>For example, one measure for the habitat and wildlife protection and restoration focus area addresses the number of fish passage barriers that are to be removed or bypassed annually for the period of time covered by the Action Plan. The annual targets for the measure are the removal or bypassing of 100 barriers in 2010, 150 in 2011, 250 in 2012, 350 in 2013, and 450 barriers in 2014

<sup>19</sup>Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan II* (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

<sup>20</sup>The focus area “foundations for future restoration action” includes objectives to ensure the climate change resiliency of GLRI projects, educate future generations about the Great Lakes ecosystem, and implement a science-based adaptive management approach.

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As we reported in September 2013, EPA assesses GLRI progress primarily by evaluating performance toward meeting the annual targets for the 28 measures of progress in the Action Plan. In our 2013 report, we found that the 2010-2014 Action Plan did not identify the links between a focus area's goals, objectives, and measures of progress. That is, some of the goals and objectives in the Action Plan were not linked with any measures. We recommended that the EPA Administrator, in coordination with the Task Force as appropriate, identify linkages between long-term goals, objectives, and measures in the Action Plan for 2015 to 2019. In response to our recommendation, each focus area in the updated Action Plan is associated with two or three objectives and several measures of progress, clearly identifying the links between each objective and measure of progress.

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## Monitoring and Reporting on Progress

In response to the conference report's direction to establish a process to ensure monitoring and reporting on the progress of the GLRI, EPA created the Great Lakes Accountability System (GLAS) in 2010 to collect information for monitoring GLRI projects and progress. In cooperation with the Task Force, EPA also created a GLRI website, to provide information to both the public and funding recipients about the GLRI program and GLRI projects.<sup>21</sup> In September 2013, we found that the information on GLRI projects in GLAS may not be complete, which may prevent EPA from producing sufficiently comprehensive or useful assessments of GLRI progress.<sup>22</sup> For example, GLAS limited users to submitting information about progress using a single measure of progress, while GLRI projects may directly address multiple measures.<sup>23</sup> This prevented EPA from collecting and reporting complete progress information on each of the measures addressed by GLRI projects. As a result, we recommended that the EPA Administrator, in coordination with the Task Force, capture complete information about progress for each of the measures that are addressed by a project. In response to this recommendation, EPA modified GLAS to allow GLAS users to report

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<sup>21</sup>See <http://glri.us/>.

<sup>22</sup>GAO-13-797.

<sup>23</sup>For example, as we reported in 2013, a National Park Service GLRI project involved managing acres for invasive species, which is one measure, as well as outreach to the public on practices that prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species, which is another measure. However, GLAS required the agency to choose only one of these measures for reporting progress.

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information in GLAS about more than one measure of progress, beginning in January 2014.

In July 2015,<sup>24</sup> we found that some GLAS data were inaccurate, in part because recipients entered information inconsistently due to inconsistent interpretation of guidance, unclear guidance, or data entry errors. In May 2015, while we were completing our work for that report, EPA stopped using GLAS and began using the Environmental Accomplishments in the Great Lakes (EAGL) information system to collect GLRI project information and issued initial guidance for using EAGL. EPA officials told us that the agency created EAGL and, after consulting with Task Force agencies, conducted pilot tests of the system while we were completing our review of GLAS. After the pilot tests, in May 2015, EPA officials decided to use EAGL to collect information to monitor and report on GLRI progress, and they made the system available to Task Force agencies for an initial period of data entry. In our July 2015 report, we said that this is a good first step to resolving the data inconsistencies that we identified in GLAS, which resulted, in part, because of unclear or undocumented definitions, data requirements, and guidance about entering important data. However, as of that date, EPA had not yet established data control activities or other edit checks, although in commenting on a draft of the report, EPA stated that it planned to establish data control activities, such as verifications and documented procedures, for ensuring the reliability of the EAGL information system. Fully implementing the actions needed to address the reliability of GLRI project data should ensure that EPA and the Task Force agencies can have confidence that EAGL can provide complete and accurate information. EPA officials told us that the agency plans to use the initial data entry period to solicit feedback from the Task Force agencies in order to make changes to EAGL and the user guidance. The officials said their goal is to have EAGL ready for data entry at the beginning of fiscal year 2016.

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## Yearly Accomplishments Reports

As we reported in July 2015, in response to the conference report's direction to provide detailed, yearly program accomplishments beginning in 2011, EPA and the Task Force released two accomplishment reports in 2013 and one in 2014 that provided overviews of progress under the

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<sup>24</sup>[GAO-15-526](#).

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GLRI for fiscal years 2010 through 2012.<sup>25</sup> These reports included summary accomplishment statements for each of the five focus areas from the 2010-2014 Action Plan, as well as specific performance information for many of the 28 measures of progress in the 2010-2014 Action Plan.

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## Task Force's Process for Identifying GLRI Work and Each Agency's Share of Funding Has Evolved to Emphasize Interagency Discussion

The process for identifying each agency's GLRI work and share of GLRI funding has evolved since fiscal year 2010 to emphasize interagency discussion. As discussed in our July 2015 report,<sup>26</sup> EPA officials described four steps that Task Force agencies generally followed to identify GLRI work and funding, and the five agencies we reviewed followed these steps. The steps are as follows:

- **Agency identification of GLRI work.** EPA officials said that during the first step, each agency conducted an internal analysis to identify GLRI work that they wanted to conduct, either themselves or through other entities, within a fiscal year.
- **Task Force agreement on scope and funding for agencies' work.** In the second step, the five agencies we reviewed held discussions with the Task Force and agreed on the work that would be done in a given fiscal year, as well as the amount of GLRI funds that would be needed to conduct that work. In general, once the agencies made a final determination of the work they would conduct in a fiscal year, and the GLRI funds that would be made available, each agency entered into an interagency agreement with EPA to transfer GLRI funds from EPA to the agency.
- **Solicitation of proposals for projects designed to carry out agencies' GLRI work.** In the third step, agencies solicited project proposals from potential recipients to conduct the work identified in the second step. Project proposals were generally solicited through an

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<sup>25</sup>EPA in partnership with the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Fiscal Year 2010 Report to Congress and the President* (Washington, D.C.: March 2011); *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Fiscal Year 2011 Report to Congress and the President* (Washington, D.C.: September 2011); and *Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Fiscal Year 2012 Report to Congress and the President* (Washington, D.C.: February 2014).

<sup>26</sup>[GAO-15-526](#).

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announcement, such as a request for applications, posted on an agency's website or in other ways, such as by e-mail. Requests for applications included criteria that the agency would use to rank applications and select projects, among other things.<sup>27</sup>

- **Selection of projects.** In the fourth step, agency officials evaluated project proposals and selected the projects they would fund. Officials from the Task Force agencies we reviewed generally described similar processes for evaluating project proposals. Specifically, they said that agency officials with the appropriate expertise reviewed and ranked proposals against information in the request for applications and selected the best scoring projects for funding.

The process for identifying each agency's annual GLRI work and share of GLRI funding has evolved from one in which project and funding decisions were made on an agency-by-agency basis to one in which subgroups formed of multiple agency officials discuss and decide on what work should be done. According to EPA officials, for fiscal years 2010 and 2011, the Task Force and the five agencies agreed on work that each agency would do on an agency-by-agency basis. Officials from the agencies said that they identified work based on existing plans and worked with the Task Force to determine the work the agencies would do and the funds the agencies should receive.<sup>28</sup> Beginning with fiscal year 2012, the Task Force began emphasizing interagency discussions as it created three subgroups made up of federal agency members, one subgroup for each of three priority issues. The three priority issues, which aligned with three of the five focus areas in the 2010-2014 Action Plan, were (1) cleaning up and delisting Areas of Concern located entirely or partially in the United States, (2) preventing and controlling invasive

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<sup>27</sup>Criteria vary by request for application. For example, criteria in an EPA request for application included that applicants would be evaluated on their plan and approach for measuring and tracking their progress toward achieving the expected outcomes and outputs that apply to the relevant focus area, and on the technical and scientific merit of the proposed project, among other things. On the other hand, criteria in a FWS request for application included that applicants must specify in detail how habitat quantity or quality will be improved and must include a detailed budget indicating how the funding will be used, among other things.

<sup>28</sup>Because the GLRI began in fiscal year 2010, this process did not take place 2 years in advance, as it would in subsequent years. EPA officials told us that in 2010 the agencies also began agreeing on work for fiscal year 2011. After Congress made funds available for the GLRI for fiscal year 2010, and again after fiscal year 2011, the Task Force revisited the initial agreements made with each agency to finalize the funding amounts.



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species, and (3) reducing phosphorus runoff that contributes to harmful algal blooms.<sup>29</sup> For example, the Areas of Concern subgroup considered how close each Area was to being delisted and what cleanup actions were needed for delisting, as identified by the Area of Concern managers, among other things.<sup>30</sup>

Overall, the Task Force set aside a total of \$180 million of the available GLRI funds to address the priority issues for fiscal years 2012 through 2014: \$52.2 million in fiscal year 2012, \$63.4 million in fiscal year 2013, and \$64.7 million in fiscal year 2014. For 2015, EPA officials said that the Task Force began creating additional subgroups to identify work and funding for all five of the focus areas in the 2015-2019 Action Plan, not just the three priority issues.

According to EPA officials, the focus on priority issues for fiscal years 2012 through 2014 accelerated restoration results for one of the three priority issues. Specifically, two of the Areas of Concern targeted for accelerated cleanup by the relevant subgroup were delisted in 2014. EPA announced in October 2014 that the White Lake and Deer Lake Areas of Concern had been delisted—both had been identified by the Areas of Concern subgroup for accelerated cleanup with priority issue funds—and EPA officials told us that they expect cleanup work to be completed at four other Areas of Concern in fiscal year 2015 as a result of receiving

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<sup>29</sup>We will refer to these three priority issues as (1) Areas of Concern, (2) invasive species prevention, and (3) phosphorus reduction in this testimony. EPA officials told us that the Task Force created the three priority issues because of direction in congressional conference and committee reports. Specifically, the conference report accompanying EPA's fiscal year 2012 appropriation directed EPA to spend not less than the fiscal year 2011 enacted level for the toxic substances and Areas of Concern and the invasive species focus areas. H.R. Rep. No. 112-331, at 1074 (2011). In addition, the House committee report accompanying a fiscal year 2013 appropriation bill that was not enacted and the explanatory statement accompanying EPA's fiscal year 2014 appropriation directed EPA to spend not less than the fiscal year 2012 enacted level on those focus areas. H.R. Rep. No. 112-589, at 52 (2012); 160 Cong. Rec. H475, H978 (daily ed. Jan. 15, 2014). Furthermore, the House committee report accompanying the fiscal year 2013 appropriation bill that was not enacted identified the nearshore health and nonpoint source pollution focus area as critical for maintaining healthy communities within the Great Lakes region, and directed EPA and other federal partners to prioritize the work surrounding algal bloom control to improve water quality.

<sup>30</sup>Areas of Concern are typically managed by local groups that can include representatives of federal agencies, state, local, and tribal entities, nonprofit organizations, landowners, businesses, and other interested parties.

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priority issues funds.<sup>31</sup> In the 25 years before the three priority issues were identified, only one Area of Concern located entirely in the United States had been delisted.

In addition, EPA officials said that identifying and funding the three priority issues for fiscal years 2012 through 2014 also allowed for continued success in invasive species prevention and resulted in some progress in reducing phosphorus runoff that contributes to harmful algal blooms. However, restoration results in those two priority issues are less clear than in the Areas of Concern priority issue, in large part because the factors contributing to those priority issues persist and are likely to continue into the future.

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## Information on GLRI Project Activities and Results Is Available from Individual Agencies

In July 2015, we reported that the Task Force, as part of its oversight of GLRI, makes some information on GLRI projects available for Congress and the public in two ways: annual accomplishment reports and the GLRI website.<sup>32</sup> The annual accomplishment reports included information about some, but not all, project activities and results. Specifically, we found that the accomplishment report for progress in fiscal year 2011 identified 10 GLRI projects, (2 projects in each of the five focus areas in the 2010-2014 Action Plan) and included some information about project activities and results for each project. For example, the report noted that the “Milwaukee River (Wisconsin)—restoring fish passage” project removed a dam, opening 14 miles of the river and 13.5 miles of tributaries to allow fish to move more freely, and reconnected the lower reach of the river with 8,300 acres of wetlands, improving water quality. The report provided similar information about nine additional projects. The accomplishment reports about GLRI progress in fiscal years 2010 and 2012 also included information about project activities and results, although most information was not associated with individual projects. For example, a statement from the accomplishment report for fiscal year 2012, “GLRI partners are implementing strategic invasive species control efforts that establish or take advantage of partnerships that will continue invasive species monitoring, maintenance, and stewardship beyond the duration of individual projects,” does not identify the specific projects where these efforts are taking place. EPA also made some information available on

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<sup>31</sup>Cleanup work included removing contaminated sediment and diverting water from an underground mine.

<sup>32</sup>[GAO-15-526](#).

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GLRI projects on the GLRI website, including a project's funding agency, title, funding amount and year, recipient identification, focus area, and description. This information does not include GLRI project activities and results because the website is not designed to include it.

Each of the five Task Force agencies we reviewed collected information on its projects, including activities and results of the projects they funded, although this information is not collected and reported by EPA. Overall, for the 19 projects we reviewed, recipients reported a variety of project activities, including applying herbicide, conducting training and workshops, and collecting data. In addition, we found that recipients reported a range of results. For example, funding recipients from 8 projects reported results that can be directly linked to restoration, such as increasing lake trout production, removing acres of invasive plant species, and protecting acres of marshland. For one of these projects, the Buffalo Audubon Society reported results needed to restore critical bird habitat, such as planting 3,204 plants and removing invasive species, among other results. For another project, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission reported results in the form of improved methods for capturing sea lamprey, an invasive species, which is a parasite that was a major cause of the collapse of lake trout, whitefish, and chub populations in the Great Lakes during the 1940s and 1950s. According to a Great Lakes Fishery Commission official, the results from this project will help to further suppress sea lamprey production in the Great Lakes, thereby reducing the damage they cause to native and desirable species. For example, a single lamprey can kill up to about 40 pounds of fish in its lifetime.

For the 11 remaining projects, recipients reported results that can be indirectly linked to restoration; that is, the results may contribute to restoration over time. These included results such as simulations and data for helping decision makers make better restoration decisions in light of climate change, as well as education and outreach tools to increase awareness of invasive species. In addition, a University of Wisconsin-Madison representative told us that the university's project to improve applied environmental literacy, outreach, and action in Great Lakes schools and communities through train-the-trainer professional development institutes can contribute to restoration. Progress reports for the university's project noted that the project resulted in more than 110 school teams that guided students in restoration, service learning, inquiry, and citizen science monitoring during the 2013-2014 school year, among other things. The representative said that this contributed to restoration because participating students have implemented conservation practices,

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such as building rain gardens that slow stormwater runoff and remove contaminants from polluted runoff.<sup>33</sup>

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Chairman Gibbs, Ranking Member Napolitano, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff members have any questions about this testimony, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this testimony. Susan Iott (Assistant Director), Mark Braza, John Delicath, Carol Henn, Kimberly McGatlin, Jeanette Soares, Kiki Theodoropoulos, and Michelle K. Treistman also made key contributions to this testimony.

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<sup>33</sup>A rain garden is a depressed area of the ground planted with vegetation, allowing runoff from impervious surfaces such as parking lots and roofs the opportunity to be collected and infiltrated into the groundwater supply or returned to the atmosphere through evaporation and transpiration.

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