

International Joint Commission Twelfth Biennial Report on Great Lakes Water Quality

OTHER ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

September 2004

Overview

In the **Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement**, the governments of the United States and Canada agreed “to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem.” Under the terms of the Agreement, the two federal governments agreed “to make a maximum effort to develop programs, practices and technology necessary for a better understanding of the Great Lakes Basin Ecosystem and to eliminate or reduce to the maximum extent practicable the discharge of pollutants into the Great Lakes System.”

The **International Joint Commission (IJC)** is directed to make a full assessment of the progress toward achieving the objectives of the Agreement every two years. The **Twelfth Biennial Report on Great Lakes Water Quality** is the Commission’s most recent assessment of progress.

The Twelfth Biennial Report on Great Lakes Water Quality

In September 2004, the International Joint Commission released its *Twelfth Biennial Report on Great Lakes Water Quality*. The purpose of the report is to assess the progress being made under the Agreement and highlighting issues we conclude need timely and focused attention.

The Commission does not report on all subjects of importance to the Great Lakes, but analyzes and makes eight specific recommendations regarding the Agreement’s goals of

physical, biological and chemical integrity leading to an ecosystem approach to ecological integrity.

This information sheet is one of six that highlight important issues discussed in the report.

REMEDIAL ACTION PLANS (RAPs)

The Remedial Action Plan Program was created under Annex 2 of the 1987 Agreement. In April 2003, the Commission evaluated the status of restoration in all remaining 41 Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOCs) and issued a report in April 2003. Each of the AOCs is unique in scope, issues and leadership. As such, there is no one solution to the problems faced by the AOCs and the organization and individuals dedicated to remediate them. The Commission continues to call on the two governments, in cooperation with the jurisdictions and the communities, to provide the Commission and the public with timely and complete reporting about RAP accomplishments and challenges, and resources needed to undertake further remediation, wastewater and storm water treatment, habitat rehabilitation and protection, and other necessary actions.

Documenting progress and future needs provides the public and elected officials with a better understanding of how government funding has contributed to restoring beneficial uses in the Great Lakes AOCs, and can achieve further goals. It would provide the evidence that previous investments have been worthwhile

and that the substantial additional funding needed to fully restore ecosystem quality and beneficial uses for fish, wildlife and humans is worth the cost.

Although continuity of governmental funding is vital, we observe that those AOCs exhibiting the most progress in remediation have a combination of committed, energetic local leadership and technical assistance from academic, governmental, or private organizations.

SPILLS

The Commission is seriously concerned that major spills in the connecting channel from Lake Huron to Lake Erie, particularly in the St. Clair River, have increased over the last two years.

In April 2002, a very large oil spill (estimated at 279 - 1,000 kilolitres / 100 - 255,000 gallons) in the Rouge River required the first full implementation of the Canada/U.S. Coast Guard joint response system (CANUSLAK) that recovered 167 kilolitres (44,000 gallons) of oil during the response.

In August 2003 a major regional power blackout led to not only several overflows from wastewater treatment plants, but also an unacceptable delay in Royal Polymer's reporting of a vinyl chloride spill in Sarnia.

Less than six months later, on February 1, 2004, a leak in a heat exchanger at the Imperial Oil plant in Sarnia led to a discharge of methyl ethyl ketone and methyl isobutyl ketone into cooling water which was discharged into the river.

In May 2004 billions of gallons of rainwater contaminated with sewage, oils and other contaminants were spilled into the Rouge River and water intakes in Ontario had to be closed.

Water treatment plant operators downstream are concerned about the frequency with which they have been closing their water intakes due to these spills, and the public is concerned about the safety of its drinking water.

Scheduled Review of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement

This report triggers the much anticipated review of the historic Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. The current Agreement was signed in 1978 and was amended in 1987. It has not been updated or changed in more than 17 years. During this time, technology and our scientific knowledge and understanding have grown immensely. We need to keep pace with what we know and review the Agreement with an eye toward a sustainable future.

The International Joint Commission (IJC)

IJC was established through the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty of the United States and Canada. The Treaty recognizes that each country may be affected by the others actions in the lake and river systems along their common border; its purpose is to prevent and resolve disputes concerning these boundary waters.

For More Information

Additional information regarding IJC's *Twelfth Biennial Report on Great Lakes Water Quality* can be obtained by contacting an IJC office:

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Information about the IJC and this report can be obtained from the IJC web page at ww.ijc.org.