Federal Priorities for Building a Strong and Sustainable
Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin

February 2022

On behalf of the more than 200 communities represented by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative (“Cities Initiative”), we call on the federal government to support the following priorities identified to bolster coastal communities’ resilience against climate change, address persistent environmental issues in our waterways and help develop a blue economy in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin (“GLSL basin”). Moreover, the Cities Initiative continues to call on the federal government to implement recommendations in the Action Plan 2020-2030 to Protect the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence, many of which are included in this document.

Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin mayors appreciate the support of the federal government in launching the Canada Water Agency and its ongoing commitment to protecting and restoring our precious freshwater resources. We look forward to working with the government and parliamentarians to advance our priorities to safeguard the region’s water quality and drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth. For more information, contact Phil Murphy-Rhéaume, Canada Policy Director (514-609-5436, phillipe.murphy-rheaume@glslcities.org).

Implement a Canada Water Agency (CWA) that Will Support the Long-Term Viability of the GLSL Basin and the Communities it Sustains

- The Cities Initiative fully supports the launch of the Canada Water Agency (CWA). To ensure its success, we recommend that the CWA provide leadership in science and research in the areas of water quality, coastal processes, water levels, nutrient management and other human impacts on freshwater resources, as well as supporting the development of resources to assist local decision-makers in the long-term planning of their nearshore freshwater resources.
- Identify the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River as priority areas under the CWA’s mandate.
- Ensure that funding to support the CWA’s work NOT be diverted from existing resources that deliver GLSL basin protection and management programs, but rather complement existing resources to support a concerted vision for freshwater and Great Lakes management by the federal government. The CWA’s core role should include a coordinating function to the more than 20 federal departments and agencies that have freshwater responsibilities, along with provincial, territorial, Indigenous and municipal governments to support that vision.
- Create a Water Quality and Nutrient Management Centre under the CWA that leverages data to support precision conservation and stormwater optimization approaches.
- Ensure municipalities in the GLSL basin have a voice in the ongoing development and implementation of CWA activities by entering into a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Cities Initiative.

Leverage Federal Resources and Tools to Support Climate Adaptation for Coastal Communities

- Establish a joint Office of Shoreline Climate Change Adaption and Resilience and facilitate the development and implementation of local and regional climate adaptation and resiliency plans for communities in the GLSL basin with a $1 billion federal commitment, to be supported by cost-sharing arrangements with the Ontario and Quebec governments.
• Reinstate federal shoreline restoration funding for communities along the St. Lawrence Seaway that was canceled in 1997 to address critical erosion and flooding issues taking place along this busy navigation route.

• Ensure that GLSL basin municipalities, including the Cities Initiative, are consulted in the development of Canada’s first National Adaptation Strategy to better understand challenges being faced by communities in the region.

• Advance a green infrastructure Centre of Excellence at Infrastructure Canada, in consultation with Environment and Climate Change Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and other relevant federal ministries and agencies, to support municipalities and other key actors in accessing technical guidance, best practices and resources to support the implementation of natural and hybrid infrastructure solutions along their shorelines.

• Support the Cities Initiative’s coastal resilience program through funding to support additional research into the impacts of climate change on GLSL basin municipalities and develop decision-making tools to help communities prepare their shorelines against flooding and erosion.

Engage Municipalities in the Development of Climate Change Adaptation Tools

• Consult with GLSL basin municipalities, including the Cities Initiative, in the development of Environment and Climate Change Canada’s climate data strategy to ensure the department has a complete understanding of data and information needs for local communities.

• Make the investments required in the Meteorological Service of Canada to upgrade infrastructure and make it a world-leading resource for monitoring changes in the weather, climate, water, ice cover and air quality.

Enable Municipalities to Protect Water Quality for Their Communities

• Commit to relaunching the Clean Water and Wastewater Fund (CWWF) with a focus on modernizing and building new facilities able to address persistent and emerging nuisance pollutants that could have an adverse impact on drinking water quality (e.g. untreated sewage, phosphorous, microplastics/fibres, PFAS/PFOA, etc.).

• Fully commit to the $1 billion investment in the government’s strengthened Freshwater Action Plan and ensure that municipalities are able to access funding to implement projects under the Plan, including nature-based coastal infrastructure projects (e.g. wetlands restoration) as eligible projects.

• Establish a strengthened federal drinking water standard for PFAS and related compounds, restrict the use and sale of these substances, research their health effects and determine the scope of contamination they have caused.

Address Nuisances and Pollutants Affecting the Quality of Our Precious Freshwater Resources

• Invest $200 million to create a swimmable water action plan, in collaboration with the Ontario and Quebec governments, that will support the opening and uninterrupted operation of clean beaches in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin, including the introduction of a risk-based approach for operating beaches.

• Formally acknowledge the triggers of nuisance algal blooms (e.g. Cladophora) and develop and implement Phosphorous Reduction Action Plans and Algae Mitigation Strategies for all Great Lakes.

• Ensure progress on the implementation of initiatives in the federal-provincial and U.S.-Canada water quality agreements to address the issue of excess nutrients entering the Great Lakes.

• Consult with the municipal sector, including the Cities Initiative, in the development of the next Agricultural Policy Framework (i.e., Canadian Agricultural Partnership) to identify opportunities for supporting on-farm ecosystem services and piloting approaches to manage nutrient runoff.

• Establish a Centre for Chemical Substitution modelled on similar initiatives in the U.S. (e.g., EPA’s Safer Chemicals Research) and Sweden (i.e., Swedish Centre for Chemical Substitution) which will
undertake research and work directly with companies to substitute toxic chemicals and harmful pollutants in products.

- Launch additional intakes of the Zero Plastic Waste Initiative to help identify and promote innovative, low-cost solutions to capture and remove plastic litter from the environment, including the Great Lakes.
- Ban unencapsulated polystyrene products in all new and replacement floating facilities in the Great Lakes and Canadian coasts.
- Require that new laundry washing machines be outfitted with a filter of mesh size of 100 microns or smaller.

Support the Growth of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Blue Economy

- Introduce funding measures to encourage port modernization and investments to address resiliency against persistent high waters and other impacts of climate change, in line with recommendations put forward by the Chamber of Marine Commerce.
- Work with GLSL basin communities, including the Cites Initiative, in the development of programs that will help create, promote and enhance sustainable blue tourism services, facilities and infrastructure.
- Work with GLSL basin stakeholders to determine how Canada’s “fourth coast” can be integrated into the federal Blue Economy Strategy.