

The Binational Commissions of the Great Lakes Region: A Primer

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Great Lakes Commission

The Great Lakes Commission is an interstate compact agency founded in state and federal law and comprised of governors' appointees, state agency officials and legislators from each of the Great Lakes states. Although legally a United States institution, the provinces of Ontario and Québec have participated since the organizations' inception; a role which became more formal through a Declaration of Partnership, signed in 1999.

The Great Lakes Commission was established by the Great Lakes Basin Compact in 1955 "to promote the orderly, integrated and comprehensive development, use, and conservation of the water resources of the Great Lakes Basin." Passage of P.L. 90-419 by the United States Congress in 1968 provided consent of the Great Lakes Basin Compact. Between 1955 and 1963 each of the eight Great Lakes states passed its own enabling legislation that determines its delegation makeup and participation in the Great Lakes Commission under the terms of the Great Lakes Basin Compact.

The Great Lakes Commission's authority under the Compact includes providing advice and recommendations to governments at all levels on development, use, management and protection of the lakes. Services focus on communication and education, information integration and reporting, facilitation and consensus building, and policy coordination and advocacy. The GLC's Strategic Plan (2017-2022) identifies seven Strategic Priorities:

1. Water Quality
2. Water Management and Infrastructure
3. Commercial Navigation
4. Economic Development and Waterfront Community Revitalization
5. Coastal Conservation and Habitat Restoration
6. Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention and Control
7. Information Management and Blue Accounting

Great Lakes Fishery Commission

The Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC) was established by the 1955 Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries: 1) to formulate a coordinated fishery research program between the U.S. and Canada; 2) to make recommendations to governments; 3) to formulate and implement a program to control the invasive, noxious sea lamprey in the Great Lakes; and 4) to establish "working arrangements" among the fishery management agencies, including provincial, state, tribal, and federal authorities.

The GLFC is made up of eight Commissioners (four appointed from each of the United States and Canada; the US also appoints an alternate commissioner). GLFC work is supported by an institutional structure that includes the Board of Technical Experts and the Sea Lamprey

Research Board to advise on science; the Sea Lamprey Control Board, and committees of citizen advisors. To maintain working arrangements, the GLFC facilitates the implementation of "A Joint Strategic Plan for Management of Great Lakes Fisheries," a multi-jurisdictional agreement among the basin's fishery management agencies. Through the Joint Strategic Plan, the members work together to develop and implement shared fishery objectives and to harmonize their policies. The process occurs through several Joint Strategic Plan committees including a "lake committee" for each lake, technical committees, a basinwide Council of Lake Committees, the Law Enforcement Committee, and the Great Lakes Fish Health Committee.

International Joint Commission

The United States and Canada established the International Joint Commission (IJC) under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 to assist the governments in the prevention and resolution of disputes over the boundary waters located along the 5,500-mile (8,900-km) border between the United States and Canada. The IJC is governed by three members (commissioners) from each country appointed by the President (United States) and the Prime Minister (Canada). The IJC has authority to approve and manage structures that affect levels and flows in the boundary waters. In the Great Lakes basin, three IJC boards of control oversee structures to ensure that water levels and flows comply with IJC orders of approval: 1) the Lake Superior Board of Control; 2) the International Niagara Board of Control; and 3) the International St. Lawrence River Board of Control.

Under the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA, first signed in 1972 and most recently amended in 2012), the governments gave the IJC additional responsibilities to assist them in restoring Great Lakes water quality. As an independent, binational organization, the main roles of the IJC with respect to the GLWQA are to provide advice to governments, assess progress, identify emerging issues, and provide public outreach and education on Great Lakes water quality. In the GLWQA, the governments directed the IJC to establish a Great Lakes Regional Office, a Great Lakes Water Quality Board and a Great Lakes Science Advisory Board to assist the IJC in carrying out its Great Lakes water quality responsibilities. The IJC's Health Professionals Advisory Board also contributes to the IJC's Great Lakes work. Each of the Boards has members from both countries.

The IJC's Strategic Plan (2015-2020) identifies five Strategic Priorities:

1. Advance core Commission responsibilities
2. Further understanding of priority issues in our shared waters
3. Fulfill Commission roles and responsibilities under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement
4. Sustain and enhance the effectiveness of Boards
5. Enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of the Commission's operations

Tri-Commission Collaboration

Since 2014 staff from the three Commissions have met regularly to identify, discuss, coordinate and take action on issues of mutual interest, to the extent possible. The Three Commissions also hold regular calls with the U.S. and Canadian Co-Chairs of the Annex 2 (Lakewide Management) Subcommittee, who under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement are responsible for the development of Lakewide Action and Management Plans (LAMPs) for each Great Lake.