

Earth Day - April 22, 2008

In 1969, U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson from Wisconsin announced the first ever Earth Day, to be held on April 22, 1970. It should come as no surprise that the founder of Earth Day was a Great Lakes Senator.

The Great Lakes are the backbone of our culture and economy. However, in their 10,000-year history, the Great Lakes have never been in so much peril as they are today. They are threatened by invasive species, low water levels, global climate change, toxic sediments, and declining fish populations. We need to act now to save our waters for our children and grandchildren. This is a fight for our very identity and way of life.

Since I came to Congress, I've been fighting to protect our Great Lakes. One of my first acts as Michigan's U.S. Senator was to pass a law that bans oil and gas drilling in the Great Lakes. This legislation was signed into law in 2001, and the ban was made permanent in 2005.

In 2006, President Bush signed my Michigan Lighthouse and Maritime Heritage Act into law, which creates a federal, state, and local partnership to restore Michigan lighthouses and promote the maritime culture of the Great Lakes. Michigan is home to more lighthouses than any other state - more than 120 - and they are important cultural landmarks and tourist destinations. Now, I'm working with the National Parks Service to implement this bill.

The 2008 federal spending bill, which we passed in December, includes \$9 million to create a barrier to keep Asian carp out of Lake Michigan, and includes \$97 million for Great Lakes-specific programs. However, I know, despite our progress, that the U.S. government still must take a larger role in protecting and restoring the Great Lakes.

We're starting to take those steps. Recently, I helped lead the passage in the Senate of a budget blueprint that calls for \$77 million more than the President requested to make investments in the Great Lakes. Our budget lays the groundwork as we begin the process of writing the annual appropriations bills, and calls for investments in fisheries, toxic sediment removal, water quality programs, and programs to fight invasive species.

As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I've been very involved in writing the recent farm bill, which includes a number of programs that will improve Great Lakes water quality. The Great Lakes Basin Program for Soil Erosion and Sediment Control will target clean-up activities in severely polluted watersheds and restore urban watersheds that have been degraded by development.

In Michigan especially, we are facing serious economic challenges. This is a tough time for us, but the Great Lakes give us hope and optimism for the future. Restoring the Great Lakes presents us with real economic opportunities.

In 2005, over 1,500 representatives from federal, state, local, and tribal governments, the business and civic community, and environmental groups came together to create a Great Lakes Regional Collaborative Strategy for restoring and preserving our priceless natural heritage. According to the non-partisan Brookings Institution, implementing this Strategy will not only clean up the lakes, but will also create a net gain of at least \$24 billion in long-term economic benefits for our region. Just a few of the benefits:

- Poor wastewater treatment efforts lead to beach closures that can devastate the tourism industry in our coastal communities. Improving our treatment centers will generate \$2 to \$3 billion that is currently lost because of these beach closures.

- By fighting invasive species and increasing fish populations, we can generate up to \$5.8 billion for the commercial and recreational fishing industries.

- Protecting wildlife habitats for birds can increase tourism by up to \$200 million, with an additional \$100 million seen from increased waterfowl populations for hunters.

- Remediating toxic sediments can increase property values in coastal areas and generate new economic growth by up to \$19 billion.

This Earth Day, I hope you'll join me in remembering how important the Great Lakes are to our economy, history, and culture. These priceless treasures must be protected. Our economy and our Michigan way of life depend on them.

Sincerely,

Debbie Stabenow

United States Senator