

The Backdrop



Peter Wege has long realized that the Great Lakes – an unparalleled resource – may be the most fragile ecosystem on the planet. These vast yet vulnerable waters serve as an early warning system for the planet – both an indicator of global environmental health and a test case of mankind's ability and resolve to restore and protect our most vital resources. And the message they are sending is alarming. Deteriorating water quality, a myriad of noxious invasive species, and lingering toxic pollution pose severe threats to human health, fish and wildlife, and dramatically impact the recreational and economic environment of the Lakes.

In a 1973 letter to then Michigan Governor William G. Milliken, Mr. Wege contended that efforts to restore Great Lakes water quality were as important in scope as N.A.S.A. moon exploration, but with even greater potential for positive impact on the survival of this nation. In the decades to follow, he worked to engage people from all walks of life in efforts to heal the waters of this globally significant ecosystem. These efforts only served to strengthen his resolve that, without federal government leadership, Great Lakes restoration would fail.

Planning for the Healing Our Waters project began in late 2003. It was rooted in Mr. Wege's commitment to collaboration and animated by his belief that the key to ensuring federal leadership would be to convene national, regional, and state environmental leaders to develop a clear, concise, and compelling agenda for Great Lakes restoration. This "Magna Carta for the Great Lakes," as he has called it, would lay the foundation for increasing public awareness and for action by the federal government to achieve this ambitious goal.