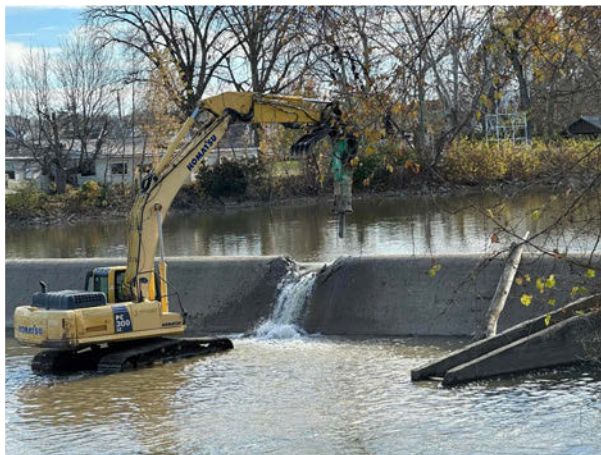
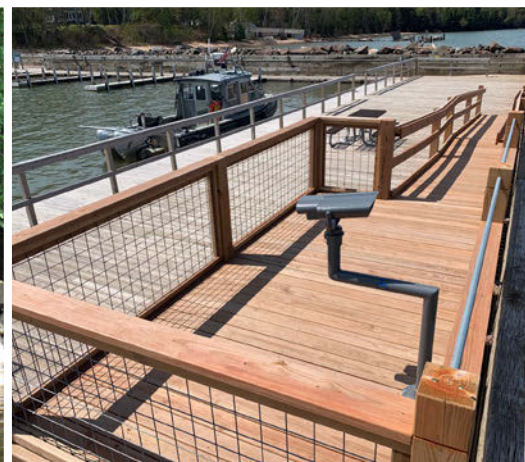


Great Lakes Restoration Projects Producing Results for People, Communities

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Great Lakes Restoration Projects

Producing Results for People, Communities

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Federal investments to restore and protect the Great Lakes are producing results for communities around the eight-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) has supported thousands of projects since it first began in 2010. This federal program has seen plenty of successes, including delisting of 6 of the 26 U.S. Areas of Concern, the region's most polluted harbors and rivers. These improvements have not only recovered ecosystems, but also bettered the health of communities and wildlife, developed local economies, and helped communities prepare for the impacts of climate change.

In recent years, the U.S. Congress has passed two laws that will allow the federal government to invest billions of dollars over the next five years to upgrade the nation's infrastructure and confront the climate crisis. These laws—the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and 2022 Inflation Reduction Act—provide essential investments that support and complement Great Lakes Restoration Initiative investments to improve the region's environment and economy. This booklet focuses on some of the many projects funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that help bolster the nation's water infrastructure, protect the region's drinking water, safeguard public health, spark job creation, expand access to recreational opportunities, and improve the quality of life for millions of people. In many cases, these investments are helping the communities most impacted by pollution and environmental harm.

Projects like those in this booklet have had a tremendous impact on communities in the Great Lakes region, but serious threats remain, underscoring the need for sustained and ongoing federal investment in restoring and maintaining waterways that are safe and healthy for all. We look forward to working with members of Congress to support work to protect and restore the Great Lakes and all who call this region home.



Since 2004, the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition has been harnessing the collective power of more than 185 groups representing millions of people, whose common goal is to restore and protect the Great Lakes. Learn more at HealthyLakes.org or follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Bluesky, Mastodon, and Threads @HealthyLakes.

CONTACT US. WE'RE HERE TO HELP.

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Combating Heat Islands in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods

SKOKIE, ILLINOIS

The Village of Skokie, Illinois, is planting at least 450 trees by 2028, reducing heat islands and improving health outcomes for its 68,000 residents.

Located 16 miles north of downtown Chicago, the Village of Skokie, Illinois, has committed to increasing its tree coverage from 25.5% to 31% by 2040.

The Village will start by planting 450 free trees over the next five years. Eligible locations for plantings include schools, apartment buildings, condominiums, businesses, and places of worship. For each tree planted, Skokie officials will match the investment with an additional tree on a Village-owned parkway or right-of-way, with the goal of 1,065 new trees.

Increasing tree canopies in urban areas provides numerous health benefits for people and the environment. Studies have shown that the presence of trees leads to better physical and mental health outcomes for people by reducing the risk of respiratory and heart disease, easing stress, and increasing overall life expectancy. A greater concentration of trees has also been linked to reducing childhood obesity by as much as 12%.

By creating shade, trees help remove “heat islands,” exposed areas that experience more extreme temperatures due to a lack of tree cover and prevalence of materials like concrete, asphalt, and glass. This shade provides opportunities for people and wildlife to stay cool and reduces the energy it takes to air condition buildings. Trees also absorb airborne pollutants and carbon dioxide, soak up stormwater, and help prevent flooding. Investing in nature-based solutions—trees, wetlands, forests and rain gardens—is an important strategy for communities to improve the health of their local waters and ultimately the Great Lakes.

These strategies are increasingly important to help communities prepare for the impacts of climate change. Skokie’s tree-planting project stems from the city’s environmental sustainability plan, which looked at climate impacts through 2050 and found that many low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods with higher proportions of People of Color lacked tree canopy coverage compared with more affluent neighborhoods.

Village officials chose to prioritize planting trees in disadvantaged areas and consulted the federal government’s Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST) to determine which neighborhoods were the best candidates.



Workers planting trees in a Skokie neighborhood. Credit: Village of Skokie

The online CEJST database uses U.S. Census data to identify areas across the country that face greater economic, environmental, and sociopolitical burdens.

In 2024, a partnership between the Village of Skokie Beautification & Improvement Commission and the Skokie Chamber of Commerce will begin surveying potential planting locations in these neighborhoods and beyond.

This project is made possible by a \$327,000 grant from the Urban and Community Forestry Program, an initiative of the United States Forest Service that awarded nearly \$68 million to projects in the Great Lakes region last year. In 2023, the Forest Service received more than \$1.1 billion from the Inflation Reduction Act to award to urban communities for forestry projects nationwide.

COST: \$327,000

KEY PARTNERS: United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry Program, Village of Skokie Beautification & Improvement Commission, and Skokie Chamber of Commerce.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Air pollution, heat islands, stormwater runoff, environmental justice, and mental and physical health.

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: By planting trees in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the Village of Skokie will combat heat islands, mitigate pollution, and improve the mental and physical health of residents.

Restoring Fish Migration Pathways in Indiana's Mississinewa River

MARION, INDIANA

Removing an unsafe low-head dam in Indiana's Mississinewa river leads to increased fish habitat, safer recreation, improved water quality, and increased flood prevention.

By removing the Charles Mill Dam on the Mississinewa River in November 2023, the City of Marion, Indiana, reconnected nearly 1,000 miles of waterways, improved public safety, and restored vital migration routes for local fish and wildlife species.

Built in 1936, the Charles Mill Dam was a low-head dam adjacent to the historic Charles Mill grist mill, along the banks of the Mississinewa River in Marion. Low-head dams, which serve no purpose in reducing flood risk, are known to create underwater, recirculating currents that can trap and kill unsuspecting swimmers, making them deceptively dangerous for public safety.

In 2016, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources conducted an inspection of the dam and found it to be "extremely dangerous and in poor condition," according to a feasibility report released by the City of Marion prior to the demolition process. In the late 2010s, the Charles Mill Dam was the site of several deaths and near drownings, primarily involving children and young adults.

Low-head dams also pose significant risks for the long-term populations of fish, which rely on connected

networks of streams and rivers to migrate. When fish are prevented from migrating by fish passage barriers like dams and culverts, they may be unable to access their spawning habitats, which can result in population decline.

The Mississinewa River, which spans 100 miles across Indiana and Ohio, is home to more than 70 species of fish, with an estimated 85% of those species migrating upstream. Prior to demolition, the position of the Charles Mill Dam created a barrier that prevented access to 965 miles of connected waterways for species like large- and smallmouth bass, catfish, bluegill, and carp.

The dam removal project was completed in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via its National Fish Passage Program, which removes barriers like these across the country to increase fish migration and spawning opportunities. Removal of the Charles Mill Dam resulted in the largest network of waterways opened by a fish passage project in the state of Indiana.

The National Fish Passage Program is funded in part by the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which granted \$455 million to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Of those funds, \$200 million were allocated for distribution to the National Fish Passage Program over a five-year period. The Charles Mill Dam project was awarded \$325,000, with an additional \$235,000 in partner matching.

Financial contributions from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law have allowed the National Fish Passage Program to triple its resources for fish passage projects nationally, including 10 projects in the state of Indiana. Currently, similar projects in the Hoosier state are underway in Fort Wayne, Anderson, Richmond, Edinburgh, and Terre Haute.

COST: \$560,000

KEY PARTNERS: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Indiana Department of Environmental Management, Ecosystems Connections Institute, Christopher B. Burke Engineering, and the City of Marion, Indiana.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Removing barriers to fish migration, safeguarding fish populations, reconnecting and revitalizing local waterways, protecting public safety, and improving outdoor recreation.



Heavy equipment breaking down the Charles Mill Dam. Credit: EcoSystems Connections Institute, LLC

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: The removal of the Charles Mill Dam will allow more than 70 species of fish to access valuable spawning grounds across 965 miles of reconnected waterways.

Preventing Combined Sewer Overflow to Lake Michigan

LANSING, MICHIGAN

Upgrading wastewater infrastructure in Lansing, Michigan, is preventing millions of gallons of sewage from overflowing into local waterways, protecting water quality, and improving public health.

Between 2020 and 2035, Lansing, Michigan, will invest an estimated \$250 million into separating its outdated and leaky combined sewer overflow system to meet federal requirements and prevent millions of gallons of untreated sewage from entering the watershed each year.

Combined sewer overflow systems are designed to prevent flooding during rain and snow events by collecting overflow from sewage systems and storm drains and delivering it via a single overflow pipe to a nearby water treatment plant. In 2019, the Environmental Protection Agency reported that combined sewer overflows are a “priority water pollution concern” for 860 U.S. municipalities, many of which are located in the Great Lakes region.

Lansing’s combined sewer overflow system is notoriously leaky. Intense rain can overwhelm the system, spewing sewage into the nearby Grand River—the longest river in Michigan—and one of its tributaries, the Red Cedar River. From there, the contaminated water drains into Lake Michigan.

In 2020, Lansing’s combined sewer overflow system delivered more than 333 million gallons of sewage-contaminated water to the Grand River. The system is easily overburdened by even relatively small rain or snow events, and in some recent years has produced more sewer overflow than any other city in the state. In 2019, for example, a rain event that produced approximately half an inch of precipitation resulted in more than 4 million gallons of polluted overflow.

Because of overflow events like these, the Grand and Red Cedar rivers have been designated “impaired” by the Michigan Department of the Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) and are at times considered unsafe for human contact due to the presence of bacteria like *E. coli*.

Overflow incidents like these also put fish and wildlife populations at risk by overburdening the waterways with nutrients like carbon, phosphorous, and nitrogen, which use up too much of the oxygen in the water and can result in fish kills.

In 2022, the city received \$6,500,000 through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law via Michigan’s Clean Water

State Revolving Fund, an investment that will help Lansing meet federal clean water regulations. The grant also has the potential to help ease the financial burden placed on the city’s 78,500 residents, who are expected to pay 4% more per year on their sewage utility bills for the duration of the project; this increase would be higher without these additional funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

Once completed, the elimination of the combined sewer overflow system will revitalize hundreds of miles of Michigan sewers, help safeguard more than 154 species of fish, and make the Grand and Red Cedar rivers safer for water recreation.

COST: \$250,000,000

KEY PARTNERS: City of Lansing, Michigan; EPA; Lansing Board of Water and Light; Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Public health and safety, water quality, water pollution, water infrastructure.



Pipe part of a combined sewer overflow system in Lansing.

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Renovating Lansing, Michigan’s combined sewer overflow system is preventing millions of gallons of untreated sewage from contaminating local waters and Lake Michigan, thereby protecting public health, safeguarding fish wildlife populations, and increasing recreation opportunities.

Protecting the Lake Superior Coastline from Severe Storm Events

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

Improvements to the downtown Lakewalk in Duluth, Minnesota, are increasing climate resiliency, public safety, and accessibility, along the Lake Superior coastline.

In 2017 and 2018, three major storms along the banks of Lake Superior caused more than \$30 million in damage to the waterfront Lakewalk in Duluth, Minnesota.

The Lakewalk—which offers access to downtown tourist districts, beaches, historic sites, and views of the lake—was built in 1986 and expanded over the course of the last 38 years to encompass nearly eight miles of paved, multi-modal pathways for bikers, skateboarders, pedestrians, and anyone else interested in exploring the natural beauty of the coast.

The trail has become a popular destination for activities like birdwatching, hiking, picnicking, concertgoing, and shopping for both locals and the city’s more than 6 million annual tourists. However, as climate change has resulted in more frequent severe storm events, the Lakewalk’s proximity to Lake Superior has paved the way for continued infrastructure challenges.

The 2017 and 2018 storms, which were considered state and federal disasters, eroded parts of the shoreline and displaced large boulders that had protected the lakefront from Lake Superior for more than 30 years. After months of costly repairs and concerns about future storm events, city officials consulted with local, state, and federal partners to develop the Lakewalk Transportation and Resiliency Improvement project, which seeks to rehabilitate damaged portions of the trail and fortify the Lakewalk against climate change. Preparing communities for the impacts of climate change, like flooding, not only protects local infrastructure, homes, businesses, and outdoor trails, but in the long run, it also protects Great Lakes water quality and fish and wildlife habitat.

One aspect of the project is enhancing existing revetments that separate the Lakewalk from the water. Revetments are built with impact-resistant material, such as concrete or boulders next to shoreline banks or walls to absorb the impact of incoming water to prevent erosion. Boulders that were displaced during previous storms will be replaced by heavier rocks weighing up to nine tons, with the hope that increasing the size and efficacy of these barriers will help prevent storm damage to nearby homes and businesses.



Duluth Lakewalk. Credit: Friends of the Lakewalk

These improvements will also protect other important infrastructure, like parts of Interstate 35, service lines for the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District, and portions of commercial railroad tracks.

Additional renovations to improve the trail’s accessibility in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act are also underway, such as paving areas with rough terrain to make the Lakewalk fully wheelchair accessible for the first time. Other goals include adding more trail connections to nearby districts and neighborhoods, creating a designated bike lane, and implementing eight new rest areas.

To fund this project, the City of Duluth was awarded an \$8,196,234 Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant by the U.S. Department of Transportation in 2023. The RAISE grant, one of 162 awarded last year, was made possible by federal funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). An additional \$2 million in BIL funding from the Minnesota Department of Transportation and \$2 million from the City of Duluth will also be invested in the project.

COST: \$12,250,000

KEY PARTNERS: U.S. Department of Transportation, City of Duluth Parks & Recreation, Minnesota Department of Transportation, and local organizations and businesses.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Coastal resiliency, erosion, public transportation, economic growth, Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility measures, storm event management, and shoreline restoration.

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Renovations to the Duluth Lakewalk will help protect against increased storm events due to climate change, safeguard local homes and businesses, and provide more ADA accessible opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Cleaning Up the Scajaquada Creek Watershed

ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK

Planning grant sets the stage for revitalizing one of most polluted bodies of water in New York by restoring wetlands, protecting native species, and reducing pollutants into Lakes Erie and Ontario.

Thanks to federal funding, conservationists near Buffalo, New York, are making strides toward major revitalization efforts for Scajaquada Creek, a 13-mile, spring-fed stream that has a significant impact on the health of both humans and wildlife in Erie County and beyond.

Scajaquada Creek, which is considered one of the most polluted bodies of water in the state by the Environmental Protection Agency, flows through a portion of the Erie Canal before emptying into the Niagara River, which in turn connects Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The stream has been a source of concern for water conservation organization Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper for more than 30 years.

Currently, the stream is heavily polluted by sewage overflow and industrial waste from nearby brownfields (land that is abandoned or underutilized due to pollution from industrial use). Stormwater and sediment runoff contribute to this pollution, which in some areas has resulted in contaminated mud and soil up to five feet deep. As of 2023, Scajaquada Creek contained 20 times more fecal bacteria than is considered safe for human contact and was identified as a breeding ground for avian botulism, a disease that is estimated to have killed thousands of birds in the area.

Initial steps toward revitalization will involve restoring the stream's natural pathways by addressing issues caused by poor infrastructure, such as straightened channels, hardened shorelines, and buried sections of the stream. Through returning the natural flow of water, conservationists hope to restore at least some of the area's historic wetlands, 98% of which have been destroyed. Wetlands are important habitats that help filter water and provide homes to countless fish and wildlife species.

These restoration efforts will also protect and increase native plant species, address the sewage and industrial pollution problems, and clean up contaminated soil. These improvements will lead to better public health outcomes, not only for the approximately 100,000 people in Buffalo, Cheektowaga, Depew, and Lancaster who rely on the 29-square-mile Scajaquada Creek watershed, but also residents of other interconnected watersheds around Lakes

Erie and Ontario.

To fund these projects, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper was awarded \$900,000 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate-Ready Coasts initiative. A portion of the funding, which was made available by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation

Reduction Act, will go toward a \$600,000 feasibility study that will outline next steps for the restoration process.

The feasibility study was initiated in July 2023 by Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Buffalo District and is being funded by these federal dollars and \$250,000 in partner matching from the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation in western New York.

The study will focus on the portion of the stream that flows through Cheektowaga and is expected to take two years to complete. Upon its completion, the Scajaquada Creek project will become eligible for up to \$10 million in federal funds for continuing restoration efforts.

COST: \$900,000

KEY PARTNERS: Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Buffalo District, Margaret L. Wendt Foundation, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Water pollution, habitat loss, wetland degradation, sewage and industrial waste overflow, native species conservation, sediment and stormwater runoff.



Part of a flood risk management feasibility study within the Scajaquada Creek watershed. Credit: Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Between now and 2025, a two-year feasibility study will pave the way for major restoration efforts to western New York waterways and wetlands.

Removing Lead Water Pipes in Communities to Protect Public Health

CLEVELAND, OHIO

Replacing lead water service pipes in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, will reduce the risk of toxic lead exposure for children and adults.

Seventy years after Cleveland, Ohio, stopped installing lead-based water service lines in homes, its Division of Water is still hard at work replacing the county's approximately 178,000 remaining lead lines with copper. Although the Division of Water has routinely replaced between 2,000 and 3,000 lead pipes per year, its number of lead pipes still rank among the highest in the country. At the current rate of replacement, it will take decades to ensure all 1.4 million people in the Cuyahoga County service area have safe, lead-free service lines.

Replacing lead service lines is an important public health issue. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the presence of lead in drinking water can cause severe negative health effects for adults, children, and fetuses. Adults who consume lead in drinking water may experience symptoms like high blood pressure, a decline in cardiovascular health, increased risk of hypertension, decreased kidney function, and reproductive issues. In pregnant people, lead exposure

can result in premature birth and small, undernourished babies. Children may experience anemia, hearing problems, behavioral and learning delays, and, in severe cases, seizures, coma, and death.

Cleveland Water has been consistently treating the city's drinking water for lead since 1997, and no new lead-based lines have been installed since 1954, but the utility still says that replacing existing lead lines with non-toxic copper is the safest course of action for Cleveland residents.

To that end, the City has been ramping up its lead pipe replacement efforts since 2021, when it launched a \$2.5 million pilot program funded by state and federal dollars to replace lead service lines to more than 450 daycare centers in Cleveland.

From there, the city received \$19 million in federal funding from the Ohio EPA, which allowed Cleveland Water to replace more than 4,000 pipes in 2023. The city plans to apply for additional funding, made available as part of \$355 million awarded to the Ohio EPA via the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, in similar amounts each year for the next four years.

This support will allow Cleveland to replace 4,000–6,000 lines annually, with total replacement of all lead service lines expected to be completed in 25 years. Initial work is centered on 13 communities that have been identified as “disadvantaged,” according to guidelines set by the federal government that assess communities based on rates of poverty, unemployment, water affordability, and other factors. Out of the 78 total communities in the Cleveland Water service area, these 13 communities are home to 80% of the lead service lines.

COST: \$19,000,000

KEY PARTNERS: Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, City of Cleveland Division of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of Labor.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Lead poisoning, water quality, water pollution, water infrastructure, and environmental justice.



Lead pipes that have been removed from a water system.

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Cleveland Water was able to replace more than 4,000 lead pipes in 2023. Future funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will enable the city to continue this progress, removing lead water pipes from 13 disadvantaged Cleveland communities and eliminating 80% of the remaining lead service lines in the city, resulting in better health outcomes for residents of Cuyahoga County.

Reducing Water Pollution Caused by Acid Mine Drainage

LUZERNE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA



An acid mine drainage treatment system on Nanticoke Creek. Credit: Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection

Restoring the natural flow of Nanticoke Creek and removing old dams and culverts will help prevent further acid mine drainage, erosion, flooding, and waterway pollution.

After generations of a thriving coal economy, Pennsylvania is now home to approximately 5,000 abandoned underground mines, making up one third of the abandoned mine lands in the country. These mines—which often produce a form of water pollution known as acid mine drainage—release toxic metals, contaminants, and methane gas into the environment and pose serious health risks for humans and wildlife.

While acid mine drainage is not as common in the Great Lakes Basin as other forms of pollution and environmental harm, it is important to recognize the different threats to local waters and how they impact drinking water, public health, and quality of life. One of the principles of Great Lakes restoration and protection is the need to tackle—in a comprehensive way—all of the issues impacting the waters that people and wildlife rely on.

Acid mine drainage is the leading source of water pollution in Pennsylvania and occurs when water makes its way through underground mine systems, where it meets with heavy metals and becomes acidic. When this polluted water flows into connected waterways, it introduces toxic metals like lead and mercury into drinking water, damages

the soil, harms the growth of plants, and erodes infrastructure like roads and bridges.

For Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River Basin, which spans almost half the land area of the state, acid mine drainage is a primary concern. Today, only 30% of streams in the basin demonstrate the natural hydrological and ecological qualities of a stream, and some have been declared "biologically dead," meaning they are unable to support aquatic life. Restoration of these streams is a major step toward improving public and environmental health outcomes across the state.

Thanks to federal funding, nonprofit organization Earth Conservancy is undertaking a major restoration process for Nanticoke Creek, a 4.5-mile tributary of the Susquehanna River in Luzerne County. The project will help prevent further acid mine drainage to the Susquehanna River Basin by restoring the creek's historic alignment and preventing water from flowing into nearby abandoned mines.

To accomplish this, conservationists plan to reconnect the Nanticoke Creek headwaters in the upper part of the stream, allowing water to resume its natural flow. The project will also remove or replace outdated infrastructure like culverts, dams, and bridges to increase the water capacity of the tributary and reduce the risk of erosion and flooding.

In October 2023, Earth Conservancy was awarded \$17.5 million in federal grant monies for the restoration of Nanticoke Creek. The funding was awarded by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's Abandoned Mine Lands and Acid Mine Drainage Grant Program and was made possible by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which allocated \$240 million to the state of Pennsylvania for clean water projects. Along with a \$1,956,427 Brownfields Cleanup grant awarded last June by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Earth Conservancy will use this funding to complete 15,000 linear feet of improvements in the Nanticoke Creek restoration plan.

COST: \$19,456,427

KEY PARTNERS: Earth Conservancy, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: Water pollution, acid mine drainage, public health, flooding, and habitat restoration.

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: The restoration of Nanticoke Creek will restore 15,000 linear feet of Nanticoke Creek, reducing acid mine drainage, flooding, and erosion.

Making the Apostle Islands More Accessible for Visitors with Disabilities

BAYFIELD, WISCONSIN

Adding accessible ramps, boat launches, trails, and signage is helping visitors with disabilities access a culturally and environmentally significant Great Lakes destination.

The Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, known for its natural beauty and views of Lake Superior, is becoming more accessible for visitors with disabilities.

Officially designated a national lakeshore in 1970, the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is located near Bayfield, Wisconsin, where it overlaps with a portion of the Red Cliff Reservation. The 21 publicly available Apostle Islands have deep historical and cultural significance for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and attract more than 200,000 visitors per year.

Tourists travel to the site to visit the famous sea caves, kayak in Lake Superior, explore historic lighthouses, walk along the 12-mile mainland lakeshore, and much more. However, thanks to uneven terrain and inaccessible infrastructure, not all guests have been able to fully experience the area's natural splendor.

Federal investments to restore and protect the Great Lakes are helping ensure that everyone, including those with mobility needs, non-English speakers, and people with disabilities, can access and enjoy the myriad benefits—such as hiking, wildlife viewing, fishing, and water sports—across the region.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 12% of Americans live with mobility needs that make it difficult to do activities like climb stairs or walk on rocky beaches. At the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, these difficulties have been exemplified at places like the popular Meyer's Beach, where a 45-step staircase between the parking lot and the shore has prevented visitors with mobility concerns from accessing outdoor recreation opportunities at the nearby boat launch.

Since 2022, the Friends of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore—a nonprofit organization comprised of local water recreation enthusiasts, conservationists, businesspeople, and other advisors—have been raising funds to improve accessibility to the area. At the forefront of these efforts are plans for a 500-foot Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible ramp, bilingual informational displays, audio and tactile accommodations for blind and deaf visitors, and a

wheelchair-accessible overlook on the dock at Little Sand Bay.

Updates also include a network of accessible trails along the mainland lakeshore, which was previously without formal hiking and walking paths. By introducing these trails, conservationists hope to prevent habitat destruction and damage to lakeside flora from “social trails,” which are created when visitors forge their own paths through the environment.

These improvements are made possible in part by a \$165,577 grant from the U.S. National Park Service via funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Additional funding includes an in-progress \$325,000 fundraiser by the Friends of the Apostle Islands. As early as this year, Park Service officials will collaborate with the Friends of the Apostle Islands and other key partners to begin work on these projects.

Continued investment in the Apostle Islands not only inspires tourism in Wisconsin, but also helps the National Park Service study, preserve, and protect a myriad of local wildlife, including deer, bears, foxes, coyotes, beavers, otters, hares, waterfowl, and more than 80 species of fish.

COST: \$490,577

KEY PARTNERS: U.S. National Park Service, Friends of the Apostle Islands, Wilderness Inquiry, U.S. Access Board, Wisconsin Coastal Management, and various corporate and private advisors.

RESOURCE CHALLENGES ADDRESSED: ADA accessibility, environmental justice, and habitat conservation.



Accessible viewing platform up to binocular on a dock at Little Sand Bay. Credit: National Park Service

RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Upcoming infrastructure improvements to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore will increase accessibility for visitors with disabilities and help preserve local wildlife.

