

It's our turn

Stepping into Great Lakes governance

BY SCOTT SOWA

THOSE OF US WORKING in Great Lakes science, policy, and management are accustomed to complexity. But the current moment—marked by rapid federal policy shifts in the United States—presents both new challenges and new opportunities. This is not simply a matter of adapting to change; it is a test of whether the broader Great Lakes governance system is prepared to sustain environmental outcomes at scale while navigating evolving political dynamics.

Recent U.S. federal changes affecting water, climate, and endangered species policy are being felt across the region. Staffing reductions at federal agencies have led to an unprecedented loss of institutional knowledge and capacity. These changes do not eliminate legal authority—states, Tribes, and local governments retain it—but they significantly diminish enforcement, monitoring, and program continuity. The risk is not regulatory collapse, but quiet erosion: delayed permits, fewer inspections, reduced data collection, and cumulative impacts that may go unaddressed or even unseen, making future responses more costly or irreversible.

While it is easy to feel pessimistic, we at The Nature Conservancy believe there is reason for cautious optimism. At binational forums across the region, I continue to see strong bipartisan and binational support for Great Lakes policies and programs. That commitment has been evident in the coordinated response by organizations mobilizing to oppose proposed cuts to key Great Lakes programs in the FY26 federal budget. I am deeply grateful to our Congressional champions who continue to support the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and advance bipartisan legislation such as the Great Lakes Fisheries Reauthorization Act.

Importantly, the Great Lakes governance system was built for moments like this. Binational and interstate compacts, treaties, federal and state enabling laws, and the principles of cooperative federalism create a dense web of shared authority and institutional redundancy. The Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Agreement and

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Compact exemplify this resilience by establishing durable expectations for sustainable water management across jurisdictions. While a pullback by any partner—including one as significant as the U.S. federal government—is challenging, it is not unanticipated. The question before us is not whether authority exists, but whether we are prepared to fully exercise it.

In the near term, states are shouldering much of the burden, and I am encouraged by their response of prioritizing enforcement, strengthening cross-border coordination, and partnering more deeply with Tribes, universities, NGOs, and local governments. Multistate invasive species enforcement efforts, risk-based permitting, and cooperative science initiatives show how innovation and pooled capacity can partially offset federal reductions.

Over the longer term, I envision that collective efforts to diversify and stabilize public funding, complemented by filling national policy gaps and harnessing market mechanisms to drive conservation outcomes, will bring about exciting opportunities for collaboration and innovation. Thankfully, we are already seeing progress across these fronts. State-level funding initiatives such as Minnesota's Legacy Amendment, Ohio's H2Ohio program, and New York's Environmental Bond Act demonstrate how voter-backed and executive-led efforts can generate sustained investment in land and water conservation. These models underscore a growing reality: we must explore new public funding options beyond U.S. federal appropriations.

Additionally, Canada's continued investment in monitoring, science, and implementation helps maintain the integrity of binational agreements like the Boundary Waters Treaty and Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. New investments—such as the establishment of the Canada Water Agency and Can$420 million for the Great Lakes Freshwater Ecosystem Initiative—demonstrate Canada's commitment to freshwater health in general and more specifically to the Great Lakes. Collectively, these actions show that Canada is not merely a partner, but a ballast that can help stabilize collaborative management of the system in periods of rapid U.S. political change and funding uncertainty.

Funding challenges are especially acute for local governments, particularly aging water infrastructure. Community-based systems have long relied on user fees, yet these models often proved insufficient to protect water resources. Major federal investments in the 1970s and 1980s helped address infrastructure backlogs, but many communities have struggled to keep up. New regional and state investments are essential not only to protect freshwater ecosystems, but also to ensure equitable access to safe and affordable water.

States and local governments are also stepping in to address regulatory gaps left by weakened federal protections. Illinois's efforts to establish new state-level wetland protections and Michigan communities experimenting with shoreline management ordinances reflect a broader trend: environmental leadership is increasingly emerging at subnational levels. This is where regional collaboration becomes indispensable. Interstate and basinwide organizations help align policies, share data, and present a unified voice—functions that become even more critical when federal policy ceilings or floors shift on issues like pollution, invasive species, and hydrology that ignore political boundaries.

Universities and professional societies such as the International Association for Great Lakes Research have a unique role to play by providing continuity. Stewarding long-term datasets, preserving institutional memory, convening cross-sector partnerships, and training the next generation of professionals are more important than ever. Just as critical is maintaining public trust by practicing transparency, acknowledging uncertainty, and grounding research in the needs of local communities and decision-makers. Place-based engagement that treats communities as partners, rather than research subjects, is essential in an era of skepticism toward science and government.

Ultimately, the Great Lakes governance framework remains legally robust. The challenge before us is not survival, but evolution. Previous generations stepped up when circumstances demanded it. Now, it is our turn. If states, provinces, Tribes, municipalities, businesses, universities, and NGOs step forward as coequal stewards—investing in capacity, coordination, and credibility—we can make the Great Lakes management system more resilient than ever. That is not a consolation prize; it is a responsibility—and a chance to lead.

Scott Sowa is the Juli Plant Grainger, Great Lakes Program Director at The Nature Conservancy.