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Canada Lags Behind U.S. in Great Lakes Protection

Urgent action needed to clean up and protect the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, new Blueprint says

Toronto – Canadian governments must do their fair share to clean up and protect the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, according to a *Great Lakes Blueprint* released today by six leading environmental groups. The Blueprint release coincides with a meeting of experts in Toronto over the next two days to discuss protecting Great Lakes drinking water.

“The U.S. Congress is considering billions in Great Lakes spending. With half of the Canadian population depending on the Great Lakes and their tributaries for drinking water, Canadian funding to protect the resource is grossly inadequate,” said Derek Stack, Executive Director, Great Lakes United.

The United States has proposed a bill that earmarks \$20 billion for Great Lakes clean-up efforts, and has already taken concrete action on many fronts.

“U.S. efforts to clean up and protect the Great Lakes are eclipsing Canada’s meager commitments,” said Aaron Freeman, Policy Director, Environmental Defence. “These waterways carry more than our history. They provide the lifeblood of our economy, the water we drink, and the places we go to relax and rejuvenate ourselves.”

The causes of this on-going crisis are clear:

- cities dump untreated sewage into the Great Lakes in enormous quantities;
- Canadian industries emit more than 1 billion kilograms of pollutants to the air, and on a per-facility basis, release far more than their U.S. counterparts;
- ocean-going vessels are responsible for at least 65% of the now over 180 invasive species wreaking havoc on Great Lakes native species;
- water levels in Lakes Huron, Michigan and Superior are well below normal, with Lake Superior surpassing its record low set in 1926; and,
- unsuitable urban development is destroying sensitive wildlife habitat. Projections are that by 2030, 3 million more people will live in Lake Ontario's basin, which could greatly increase these development pressures.

“The Great Lakes are without a doubt Canada's most important freshwater ecosystem,” said Dr. Anastasia Lintner, Staff Lawyer & Economist, Ecojustice. “We must act now to heal the damage we've inflicted and protect these precious waters for our children.”

“It is crucial that the federal and provincial governments invest heavily in upgrading wastewater systems and sewage treatment facilities,” said Maureen Carter-Whitney, Research Director at the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy. “This is necessary to ensure that pollution such as industrial chemicals, pharmaceuticals and human waste, no longer threaten the Great Lakes.”

Great Lakes Blueprint: A Canadian Vision for Protecting and Restoring the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Ecosystem outlines eight priorities that Canadian governments must follow to protect the Great Lakes for future generations, including: (1) improving governance; (2) enabling effective public participation; (3) connecting water quality and quantity; (4) practicing ecosystem based stewardship; (5) eliminating toxic substances; (6) upgrading sewage infrastructure; (7) halting aquatic invasive species; (8) protecting water levels and flows.

“Concerns are growing that we may surpass the tipping point in the Great Lakes,” said Sarah Miller of the Canadian Environmental Law Association. “Once beyond this point, the ecosystem will not be able to bounce back and recover from the continuing complex stresses from human activity.”

“Most people do not realize that only one per cent of the water in the lakes is renewed each year. There is a precarious balance between human activities and lake levels,” said Tim Morris, National Water Campaigner for Sierra Club of Canada. “Climate change, urban expansion, and diversions are all serious threats to water levels. Levels in the upper lakes are already approaching record lows. Governments must show leadership by committing wholeheartedly to water conservation, prohibiting diversions, and spurring citizen action to save Great Lakes water.”

Great Lakes Blueprint: A Canadian Vision for Protecting and Restoring the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Ecosystem is available at no cost to download on the organizations’ web site: Canadian Environmental Law Association (www.cela.ca); Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (www.cielap.org); Ecojustice (www.ecojustice.ca); Environmental Defence (www.environmentaldefence.ca); Great Lakes United (www.glu.org); Sierra Club of Canada (www.sierraclub.org)

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