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June 6, 2013

Great Lakes Advisory Board
Environmental Protection Agency
77 West Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60604-3507

RE: Written comments regarding the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) for consideration by the Great Lakes Advisory Board

Dear Great Lakes Advisory Board,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the direction of the GLRI program for the next five years. It has been perhaps the most successful federal program I have ever been exposed to. The on-the-ground habitat restoration efforts coordinated by Huron Pines have been greatly strengthened by this program, which has helped to benefit many high quality Great Lakes tributaries in northern Michigan. Increased fish passage, reduced sediment loading, and a decrease in invasive plants have been the primary areas of projects that our not-for-profit organization has coordinated in our 11 county service area; the heart of the Great Lakes Basin.

We have been the direct grant recipient of EPA GLRI funds, have had several GLRI grants funding passed through from federal partners such as USFS, NRCS and the US Fish & Wildlife Service; and worked successfully on GLRI supported programs through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Sustain Our Great Lakes program. In all three instances, we have found the program to be highly successful and it has achieved water resource improvement and habitat restoration results that we didn't think we could pull off before the existence of the GLRI program. It's a program that has had local support, has helped leverage private sector investment, and has had a tremendous positive response from our community and legislative leaders. The GLRI-designated staff working with us at these organizations and agencies has been outstanding and the program is widely recognized in northern Michigan. The operating principles for GLRI were accountability, action and urgency: these have defined the program that last couple of years and Huron Pines would urge you to continue to make all three key for the next five years of GLRI.

As you go forward in setting future priorities, it is vital that GLRI restore and protect high quality coastal and tributary habitats, thus ensuring the Great Lakes are much more resilient to changing climates and human impacts. Reducing the man-made problems of historical logging and poorly designed and failing culverts, bridges and dams and eradicating invasive species before they become established are also high priorities for a healthy ecosystem and have been identified within Northern Lake Huron to be top resource concerns. High quality river systems are fundamental to the healthy functioning of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Sediment has been identified as the number one pollutant to many of the river systems in northern Michigan and must be a continued focus through the completion of projects such as installing Best Management Practices at road/stream crossings. There are also hundreds of identified dams and other barriers fragmenting our water resources, resulting in loss of habitat for aquatic species and temperature increases within our cold-water river systems. Invasive species, such as phragmites, may seem like a lost cause in certain regions, but in more remote areas such as northeast Michigan, targeting these species for eradication is not a lost cause.



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I'm sure it is difficult in selecting priorities for Great Lakes Restoration and identifying areas to invest. We believe you get the greatest "bang for the buck" by putting funding into areas where a few dollars can really make a big impact. While AOC's do need help, we're concerned about all of the resources going to those areas when funding could be put into regions such as Northeast Michigan, where the projects, partnerships, and pieces are in place to get tangible results and measurable improvement in a short-period of time. The trend in 2012/2013 was for more resources into AOC's, but it has been at the expense of some great habitat restoration opportunities, especially in higher quality tributaries. We would recommend that priority project areas in the Great Lakes should be those that have the strong leadership and priorities set and that you work with those groups that can use GLRI funding to leverage additional support and implement projects important to those regions. The only thing that limits our restoration efforts in this region is funding and it is critical to continue the habitat restoration work in this region.

One of the questions your group has struggled with is how the next Action Plan can provide better guidance on the selection and prioritization process for restoration projects outside of AOC's. We believe Huron Pines has developed a very sound model for doing just that and would love the opportunity to present that to your committee at an upcoming meeting. Our cost-effective approach for delivering high impact, high priority projects has been put to the test the last few years and has shown to be an extremely effective method for watershed restoration in non-AOC areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and please work to continue this very important program.

Kind regards,

Brad Jensen
Executive Director