

Obama wants to pump \$475M into Great Lakes cleanup

May 15 2009, By JOHN FLESHER , AP Environmental Writer



President Barack Obama waves to his daughter Sasha who was on the Truman Balcony as he arrives on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Thursday, May 14, 2009. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

(AP) -- A budget proposal from the Obama administration would spend \$475 million on beach cleanups, wetlands restoration and removal of toxic sediments from river bottoms around the Great Lakes.

The spending represents a first step toward a multiyear campaign to repair decades of damage to the battered ecosystem. It also seeks to ward off new threats by preventing exotic species invasions and cutting down on erosion and runoff.

Obama's 2010 budget released in February requested the \$475 million

for a [Great Lakes](#) Restoration Initiative, focusing on the region's most pressing environmental problems. When added to existing programs such as sewer system upgrades, it would push annual federal spending on the lakes past \$1 billion.

The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) recently provided more details on how the new money would be used. Government officials and activists from the region analyzed the plan Thursday in a conference call with reporters.

"These are exactly the kind of measures we need to return the Great Lakes to health," said Andy Buchsbaum, co-chairman of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition. "This is not a long shot. This is the president putting the full weight of his office behind Great Lakes restoration."

Supporters urged the region's congressional delegation to fight for complete funding, saying the backing of a popular president from a Great Lakes state - Illinois - has opened a unique window of opportunity.

"It's very important and urgent to move forward right now," said David Ullrich, executive director of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative. "The big thing about these problems is that they don't go away, they get worse."

Obama's plan is designed to begin a \$20 billion restoration plan crafted by government agencies and nonprofit groups in 2005.

Much of the 2010 money would be funneled through state, local and tribal agencies. The biggest chunk - about \$147 million - would clean up toxic spots in rivers and streams.

Other spending would include \$105 million for habitat and wildlife protection and [restoration](#); \$97 million for prevention of near-shore pollution such as farm runoff and erosion; \$60 million to battle and prevent invasive species; and \$65 million to evaluate and monitor the initiative's progress.

Some of the specific goals include: restoring 23,000 acres of coastal, wetland, shoreline and upland habitat for wildlife and 1,000 miles of streams for fish passage; removing up to 1 million cubic yards of contaminated sediments; and cleaning up sources of contaminants at over 100 beaches that were closed five or more days in 2007.

Other measuring sticks include the extent and severity of algae blooms that suck oxygen from the lakes and kill fish.

Supporters dismissed suggestions that congressional approval of the spending might be hampered by the soaring budget deficit or opposition from other regions.

The federal government has supported cleanups of numerous watersheds, such as Puget Sound and Chesapeake Bay, said George Kuper, director of the Council of Great Lakes Industries.

The initiative would give industry and job growth a boost in the Great Lakes region, home to about 40 million people, Kuper said. Studies estimate that every dollar spent on restoring the lakes will generate twice as much in long-term economic gains, he said.

"It may not be obvious, but what is good for the ecosystem is also good for the economy," Kuper said.

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