



# Watermarks



**Agriculture  
and Water**

## Clean Water Challenge: Farming and the Great Lakes



Agriculture has played a pivotal role in the Great Lakes region's economy, culture, and water use for centuries. And it's a big part of our shared future.

Unfortunately, communities far from the source of agricultural pollution bear the brunt of the resulting economic damage and health threats. How we farm is at the root of one of the biggest Great Lakes water problems.

These problems hit hardest in communities that already bear a heavy burden from pollution. The Alliance is meeting these challenges in communities where the problems are worst, and I appreciate your support. As with every part of our work, the full story of farming and water includes the full diversity of experiences of everyone who depends on the lakes.

The Great Lakes region is known for its bountiful and diverse agricultural production, and ready access to fresh water is a huge part of what makes that possible. But runoff from farms has become the most significant water quality problem in the lakes, with nutrient pollution leading to massive harmful algal blooms that threaten drinking water, dead zones of no oxygen, loss of recreation dollars, and diminished property values. That's why we're so focused on reforming policy to stem the flow of this underregulated source of pollution to the lakes, especially in the algae bloom hotspots of Green Bay and Lake Erie.

The Alliance hired our first-ever Agriculture & Restoration Policy Director earlier this year. Thanks to your support, we now have two staff members with decades of Great Lakes agriculture expertise supporting this growing program alongside our team of clean water champions. The Alliance is leading a collaborative, innovative, and aggressive approach to tackling our runoff pollution problem as this watershed-wide effort moves into a new phase of action.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joel Brammeier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

**Joel Brammeier**, President & CEO

# The Results Are In: You helped us remove 500,000 pounds of litter!

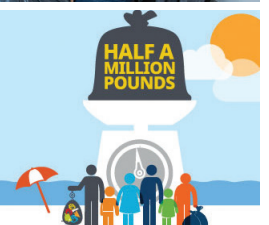
## We asked, and you delivered!

Thanks to all of you, we've removed 500,000 pounds of litter from the Great Lakes. That means fewer microplastics in our drinking water, less trash clogging up beaches and waterways, and healthier Great Lakes for everyone. This amazing achievement represents the work of more than 200,000 volunteers over the past twenty years. Community and faith groups. Families and businesses. Grade schools and high schools. Alumni organizations. Surfers, scuba divers, and professional mermaids. On all 5 Great Lakes. In all 8 Great Lakes states.

Their accomplishment shows the magnitude of what can be accomplished when Great Lakes communities work together, cleaning our beaches and collecting data that helps researchers understand plastic pollution.



The Power of  
the Great Lakes  
Community



# Agricultural Pollution and the Great Lakes

**Agriculture occupies about one-quarter of the U.S. land surrounding the Great Lakes, producing corn, soybeans, grain, and livestock. But all too often, the way we farm has serious negative impacts on the Great Lakes and the rivers and streams that flow into them. The Alliance is helping shape solutions to this pollution problem at the national and local levels.**



## Farm Runoff Causes Downstream Pollution Problems

When it rains, chemical fertilizer and manure from farm fields flow into waterways. This runoff can contain pathogens and bacteria along with nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorous.

While these nutrients are vital for growing plants, too much in our waterways can have disastrous results fueling a bumper crop of algae that can make water toxic to wildlife and people. When the blooms die, the decomposing algae uses up oxygen in the water, creating “dead zones” where fish and other aquatic creatures can’t live.

Farms are the main source of nutrient pollution flowing to the lakes, and stopping farm runoff will significantly decrease downstream algal blooms and dead zones. But national farm policy, along with a lack of mandatory regulations, makes stopping the flow of pollution off farm fields and into waterways challenging.

## Change Needed at All Levels, From Farm Fields to National Policy

Over the past few decades, small farms have been consolidated into larger operations. This has led to intensifying how food is produced across the country. Row crops used to rotate among multiple crops, but today in the Midwest, our cropland is dominated by corn and soybeans. Livestock operations are large enough that some produce as much manure waste as a small town. All of this has led to more pressure on the land to produce more, which means more fertilizers and more potential for pollution. But there are steps farms can take to reduce runoff significantly.

“Farmers are often pointed to as the problem. But we also need to recognize that farmers are one piece of a very big agribusiness system,” said Tom Zimnicki, the Alliance’s Agriculture and Restoration Director. “Yes, there are things we can be doing at the farm level to reduce pollution, but we also need to change policies at the national level to move away from this system we’ve created over the last 20-30 years. The Alliance is working on both.”

The Alliance advocates for regulations at the state and local levels to mandate, incentivize, and prioritize best practices to limit farm runoff and protect the Great Lakes and the water bodies that feed into them. The Alliance also convenes partners at the local level around the region to find community-led solutions to this pollution problem.

Next year Congress will consider a new federal farm bill, a massive funding package that is a major driver of the nation’s food and agricultural policy. The Alliance is part of a national coalition advocating for changes in farm bill programs. Today,



most federal programs delivering billions of dollars to Great Lakes farms each year are not tied to clean water goals. It's no surprise that despite these investments, the lakes aren't getting any cleaner. One goal is to tie funding for agricultural practices to clean water outcomes. In other words, if an agricultural producer receives federal funding for conservation programs, they must show a measurable reduction in pollution running off their lands.

But the Alliance isn't waiting for changes in federal programs. State and local governments have a huge role to play in reducing runoff from agricultural lands. And, they have an incentive to get involved as the impacts of nutrient pollution are felt locally.

In Wisconsin's Green Bay, the Alliance has partnered with the Fox-Wolf Watershed Alliance, local government officials, and

the Oneida Nation to host a farmer round table. At the event, farmers come together to discuss their conservation practices and learn from each other. This led to a historic agreement between four counties and the Oneida Nation to formally come together to develop a shared strategy for recovery and locally achievable goals to reduce agricultural pollution and clean up Green Bay.

In August 2014, Toledo-area residents were without water because toxins from a massive algal bloom in western Lake Erie contaminated the city's drinking water. The Toledo crisis, along with advocacy by the Alliance and other partners, led to a commitment by the Governors of Ohio and Michigan and the Premier of Ontario to reduce phosphorus inputs to Lake Erie by 40% by 2025. Although it is unlikely leaders will meet this goal in this timeframe, the commitment pushed governments to significantly increase funding for on-the-ground projects to limit agricultural runoff and focus state and federal agency staff on developing solutions.

"Stopping agricultural pollution, and protecting our waterways, is complicated. And to solve this problem, we need everyone at the table, from farmers, government agencies, businesses along the supply chain, and the people and communities getting hurt by this pollution," said Sara Walling, the Alliance's Senior Policy Manager for Agriculture and Restoration. "The good news is that a wide range of solutions exists, from local actions like in Green Bay to regional coordination like around Lake Erie to national and state policy changes. And the Alliance is working to incorporate all these tools into our policy work."

How much extra does a family of 5 in Toledo pay in their water bills due to upstream pollution?

**BILL**

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**Almost \$100 Extra!**

\*The case study is based on data from a 2020 survey administered by the Ohio Department of Drinking and Groundwater.

Downstream users are paying a real cost for managing a pollution problem they did not create, compounding water affordability issues many Ohioans face.

An analysis by the Alliance for the Great Lakes found that a family of five in Toledo is paying roughly an additional \$100/year in their water bill. The costs are due to increased costs at water treatment plants for monitoring and treatment to protect drinking water from harmful algal blooms.



# Great Lakes Credit Union Helps Protect the Great Lakes as Part of its Robust Community Giveback

Many corporate partners provide financial support for our Adopt-a-Beach program, ensuring the Alliance has the resources to assist thousands of volunteers around the region.

Great Lakes Credit Union (GLCU), a not-for-profit, member-owned financial cooperative that serves more than 80,000 members in Chicagoland and surrounding areas, proudly serves as the Lead Financial Corporation Partner for the Alliance for the Great Lakes.

Through this partnership, GLCU supports the Alliance's education and advocacy programs. The organizations have teamed up on a variety of campaigns since beginning their partnership in 2021, including public education events; beach cleanups through the Alliance's Adopt-a-Beach program, such as the successful Waukegan North Beach cleanup; promotional product giveaways; and many other public awareness events that promote the conservation of the Great Lakes and surrounding regions.

We recently spoke with the leadership team at GLCU to learn more about why they support the Alliance and its environmental work.

"GLCU's mission is to empower, engage, and better the communities we serve," said Steve Bugg, GLCU CEO & President.

"As a Great Lakes-based organization, we align with the Alliance on this mission as well as their efforts to safeguard a vital resource – fresh, clean Great Lakes water for our members and neighbors. We couldn't be more glad to have joined forces to amplify the impactful change we can make."



*Left to right: Samantha Papagianis (Alliance Ambassador), Joel Brammeier (President and CEO, Alliance for the Great Lakes), Steven Bugg (CEO, Great Lakes Credit Union), Jessica Obiala (Senior Manager of Brand Activation, Great Lakes Credit Union)*

In addition to contributing generous financial support, GLCU team members are happy to roll up their sleeves to help extend the Alliance's reach and influence, supporting, promoting, and volunteering at our beach cleanup events.

"The GLCU team, as well as our friends and families, have loved teaming up with the Alliance to host beach cleanups to help beautify important public spaces for our communities," said Bugg.

GLCU's commitment to enabling members, their families, and those in their communities to build lives they love has a far greater reach than just beach cleanups. The not-for-profit organization continues to support the Alliance's efforts to spearhead environmental advocacy throughout the Great Lakes and ensure that all communities have equitable access to clean, affordable drinking water.

Recognized a number of times over for its leadership in volunteerism and community involvement, GLCU offers educational opportunities, empowering financial tools, and community development programs across the region. The team looks forward to future partnership opportunities with the Alliance to raise awareness in the fight against plastic pollution and preserve the legacy of clean water.

**Interested in sponsorship, employee engagement, cause-related marketing, workplace giving, or in-kind support?** Contact Jonathan Heuring, Foundation & Corporate Giving Manager, at [jheuring@greatlakes.org](mailto:jheuring@greatlakes.org).

## IN BRIEF

### 3 Ways to Support the Great Lakes This Holiday

**#GIVING  
TUESDAY™**

#### #1 Giving Tuesday,

**Tuesday, November 29**, kicks off the holiday charitable giving season. Each year, it follows Black Friday and Cyber Monday with a focus on a global day of

giving back. Keep an eye out on our social media, in your email inbox, and on our website. We have a big goal of beating last year's record of \$44,000 donated in support of our work to protect the Great Lakes.

#### #2 Give the Gift of the Lakes.

**What do you get for the person who has everything but loves the Great Lakes?** Donate to support Great Lakes protection in their honor.

We make it easy to make an honorary gift at [donate.greatlakes.org](https://donate.greatlakes.org).

This tax-deductible gift will help the Great Lakes and won't get lost in the back of their closet.

#### #3 Support the Great Lakes in Your End-of-Year Giving.

Sometimes it seems like we only hear bad news about the Great Lakes.

But our team here at the Alliance for the Great Lakes is focused

each day on finding solutions to protect our region's most precious resource. Help protect the Great Lakes today with a year-end gift at

[donate.greatlakes.org](https://donate.greatlakes.org).

### Tune in: Season 2 of our Lakes Chat Podcast has arrived!

Lakes Chat, the podcast about the Great Lakes issues and what it all means for you and your community, is back for a new series of Great Lake explorations. Visit [greatlakes.org/lakeschat](https://greatlakes.org/lakeschat) to listen and catch up on season one.



### New Study: Downstream Water Users Bear Financial Burden of Upstream Pollution

In May, the Alliance released an analysis of the costs of cleaning up drinking water fouled by the algal blooms in Ohio's Lake Erie communities.

Visit [greatlakes.org/downstream](https://greatlakes.org/downstream) to read the study.

## TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

We'd love your feedback about our Watermarks newsletter. We're also happy to answer your questions about pressing Great Lakes issues.

Email us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org)



ALLIANCE for the  
GREAT LAKES

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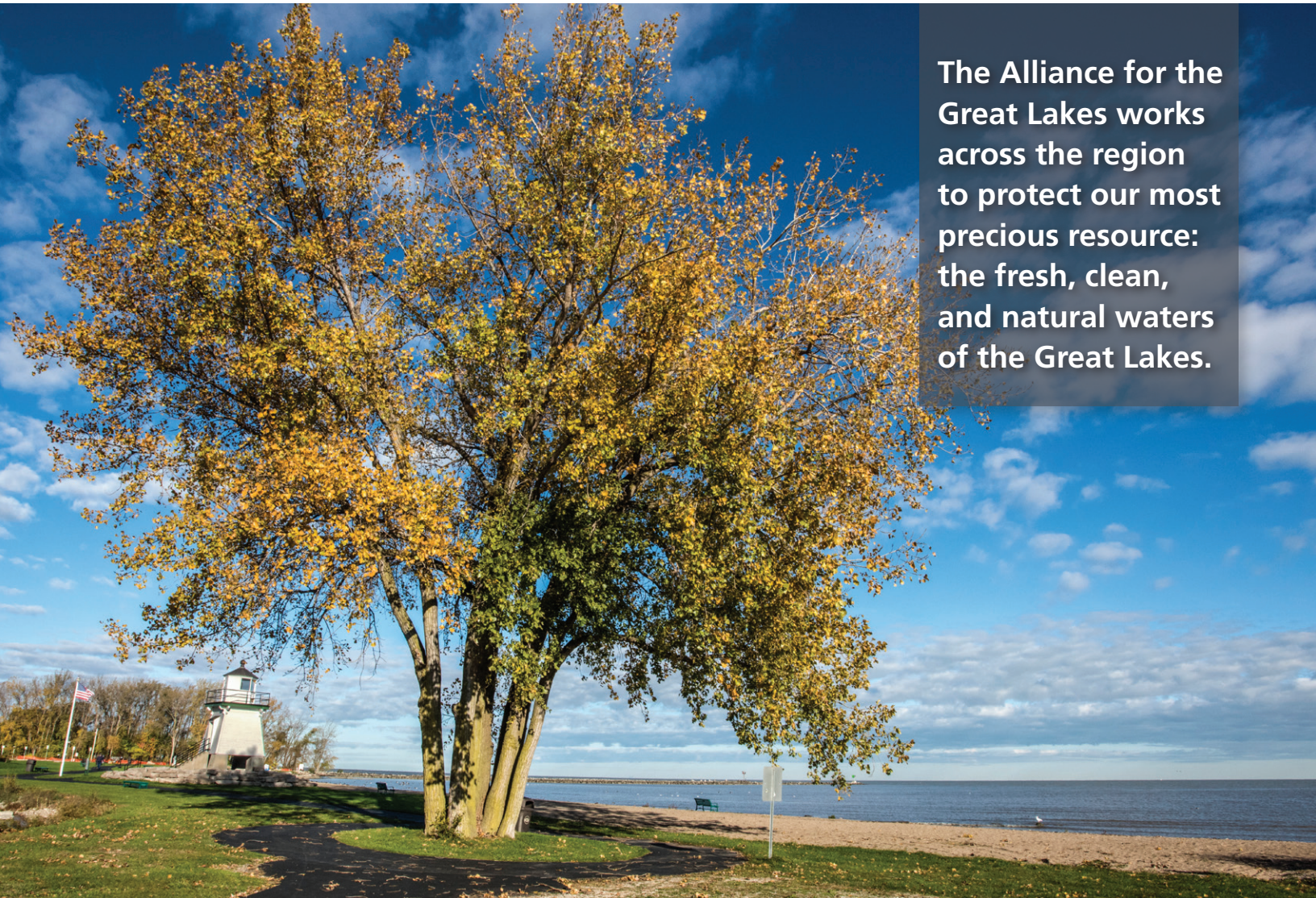
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Photos in this issue by Lloyd Degrane  
Kids for Positive Change  
Clean Water Action and Detroit Mobile Kayak



**The Alliance for the Great Lakes works across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.**