When the history is written about Great Lakes policymaking in the early 21st century, at least two groundbreaking initiatives will stand out. The first was enactment of a state compact and companion agreement with the provinces to prevent diversions of Great Lakes waters and improve basin-wide management of them. The second was the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, an unprecedented funding commitment by the U.S. government to clean up and protect the lakes.

On paper at least, says Andy Buchsbaum of the National Wildlife Federation, a new binational agreement has the potential to be added to this short list of history-making Great Lakes protections. “It really depends on how the parties implement it,” says Buchsbaum, executive director of the federation’s Great Lakes Regional Center. “It could be an incredible force for good for the Great Lakes, or it could simply be a nice paper that sits on the shelf.”

Few parties will matter more in implementation, he adds, than the Great Lakes states.

Many years in the making, and signed by U.S. and Canadian officials in September, the revised Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement is much broader in scope than its predecessors. Previous versions of the agreement (first signed in 1972) have focused largely on preventing the discharge of toxic substances into the lakes, along with cleaning up environmentally degraded “toxic hot spots” in the basin, known as “Areas of Concern.”

The revised accord has been expanded to address other threats: invasive species, habitat degradation and climate change, for example.

States, in particular, will play a lead role in a portion of the agreement that calls for reductions in the amount of phosphorus entering the lakes. Phosphorus causes harmful algal blooms and dead zones (low-oxygen areas that don’t support marine life) in the Great Lakes system — a problem most prevalent in parts of Lake Erie.

The agreement requires that phosphorus-reduction targets be set for Lake Erie within three years and that an action plan be in place within five years. The time line for the other four lakes is more open-ended.

“States are going to have to figure out where the phosphorus is coming from now, what types of reductions have to be made, and then how those reductions will be made,” Buchsbaum says. “The major sources are agriculture and wastewater treatment plants.”

With regard to invasive species, the new agreement calls for a new basin-wide early detection and rapid response action plan to be developed within two years. The two countries have also agreed to develop new tools to understand and predict — and ultimately mitigate — the impacts of climate change on the Great Lakes.

There have been notable hits and misses in implementing previous versions of the pact. Though the agreement is often...
cited as a catalyst in reducing point-source pollution and levels of toxic pollutants, only four of the 43 “Areas of Concern” have been de-listed.

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