As political tides change, advocates of protecting Great Lakes celebrate year of progress

Tim Anderson

After a tumultuous year in national politics, and in advance of a new U.S. Congress and presidential administration, advocates of Great Lakes protection and restoration won some important legislative victories at the tail end of 2016. Those accomplishments, perhaps most notably a formal authorization of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, provide the region with some much-needed certainty about federal Great Lakes policy during a period of change in Washington, D.C., said Chad Lord, policy director of the Healing Our Waters Coalition.

“It underscores the broad-based, bipartisan support that Great Lakes issues tend to have within the U.S. Congress,” Lord said in December during a web-based meeting of the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus. Since being established in 2010, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into this region for projects that preserve the largest system of fresh surface water in the world. To date, its priorities have been to keep invasive species out of the Great Lakes, clean up toxic “Areas of Concern,” reduce nutrient runoff, and restore habitat.

But while this federal initiative (run through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) has been funded annually since 2010, it’s never been authorized — a fact that, based on how federal budgets are set every year, made it vulnerable to being cut. This was especially true with a change in presidential administrations, Lord said. (Outgoing President Barack Obama was an early backer of the initiative; incoming President Donald Trump’s views are less known.)

In December, formal authorization came with passage of the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act, which calls for spending $300 million annually on the initiative between fiscal years 2017 and 2021. Lord cautioned, though, that this marks only the first part of a two-step process. That money will still have to be appropriated in each annual federal budget.

The act also establishes a new position at the EPA, that of a coordinator who would serve as a “point person” between the federal government, states and other stakeholders regarding the issue of harmful algal blooms. The rise in algal blooms from nutrient runoff has become a major concern in the Great Lakes, especially in the western part of Lake Erie. Other recent federal actions include:

- requiring the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to meet Ohio’s state water-quality standards before allowing dredged materials to be dumped into Lake Erie;
- making permanent a policy that sets aside 10 percent of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ priority funding for the Great Lakes navigation system; and
- reauthorizing the Great Lakes Fish and Habitat Restoration Act.

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