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Comeback on the Great Lakes

The Great Lakes: Cleaner,

1407

By Brian Tucker
Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Lakes Erie, Huron, Michigan, Ontario and Superior — a gift of Ice Age glaciers — are where millions of North Americans work, play — and discard their waste.

For a decade, the United States and Canada have been cleaning up these natural wonders. It has cost billions and some major problems remain to be solved. But even so, the results are remarkable.

Kent Fuller, planning chief of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Great Lakes National Program, calls it "a world-class example of a pollution control effort."

"In many respects, the lakes now are doing very well," he said. "... In the obviously visible stuff, we really have made a lot of progress."

It is what can't be seen that has environmentalists worried today. Toxic substances such as cancer-causing polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, are still getting into the lakes. Environmentalists say the danger may be more serious than the pollution of the 1960s.

But money to continue the battle to clean up the lakes is drying up, along

with other federal spending.

And some officials, like Patricia Bonner, spokeswoman for the International Joint Commission, the U.S.-Canadian agency that has overseen the boundary waters since 1909, fear lasting harm.

"The lakes are cleaner than they were 20 years ago and the water quality has improved," says William C. Sonzogni, of the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Michigan. "We've gotten this far. Let's not stop."

The '60s are not remembered with fondness by those who love these waters. Fishing was at low ebb. Blue pike disappeared from Lake Erie. The ravenous sea lamprey moved in from the Atlantic and devoured trout. Algae used up oxygen, choking fish.

Tourists were turned off by pollution. Beaches closed. Shallow Lake Erie was declared dead.

Finally, it got bad enough to make somebody do something about it.

In the '70s, the United States and Canada decided to stop the abuses. With federal aid, cities built sewage treatment plants. Willingly or under threat of lawsuits and fines, industry cleaned up its act.

'We really have made a lot of progress'

An example of the improvement is the Cuyahoga River, which flows into Lake Erie. Laden with oil and the filth of industry, the river started to burn on June 22, 1969. The blaze marked a low point for Cleveland, the river and the lakes.

"I don't like to talk about how it was and I don't like people asking about the fire," says Edith Crosby, hostess for 19 years at Jim's Steak House, a riverfront restaurant. She remembers gray, oily water and sees a difference.

"This river freezes now and it wouldn't back then. And the gulls come up here and feed, so there's fish. People call here and demand a window seat."

The change is the result of one of many projects prompted by the 1972

but will they stay that way?

gents containing phosphates. Only Pennsylvania and Ohio declined to go along.

Lee Botts, former chairwoman of the defunct Great Lakes Basin Commission and a research associate for the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University, says Lake Erie became a symbol because its problems were so visible.

"There was no oxygen left," she said. "Fish and other forms of life were disappearing and massive amounts of algae was washing up. The idea that you could really do that with a lake as large as Lake Erie is what really grabbed people's attention."

Industry has also undertaken massive projects in the lakes' cleanup. One of the largest was in northern Minnesota, where Reserve Mining Co. spent more than \$370 million to clean up its iron ore refining plant.

Scientists found asbestos-like fibers from the plant over hundreds of square miles of Lake Superior. Now, Phil Cook, a chemist at the EPA's research lab in Duluth, can say, "I think one could drink unfiltered water in the lake now and have nothing to worry about."

Botts says there has been a change in attitude by industry. "Not only can industry under the law not dump its wastes, I don't think they would if they could," she says. "They need clean water, too."

One continuing worry of environmentalists is the presence of cancer-causing chemicals and heavy metals buried in the lake sands. Another is runoff of pesticides and fertilizers from farmers' fields.

But the critical threat to water and fish are PCBs, once commonly used in electrical insulation, and other toxic compounds entering the Great Lakes through the air or groundwater.

These potentially cancer-causing agents build up in the fatty tissue of fish, then endanger humans who eat their catch.

The pesticide DDT was banned after it turned up in the food chain in the Great Lakes, and PCBs first were found in the United States in Lake Michigan, Botts says.

Toxaphene, a pesticide that replaced DDT but is little used in the Great Lakes region, recently has been

Clean Water Act, which grew out of a U.S.-Canadian agreement to do something about pollution.

As a result, the United States built \$4.9 billion in new sewage plants from 1972 to 1981 in the Great Lakes basin. Canada has spent \$1.2 billion on similar projects.

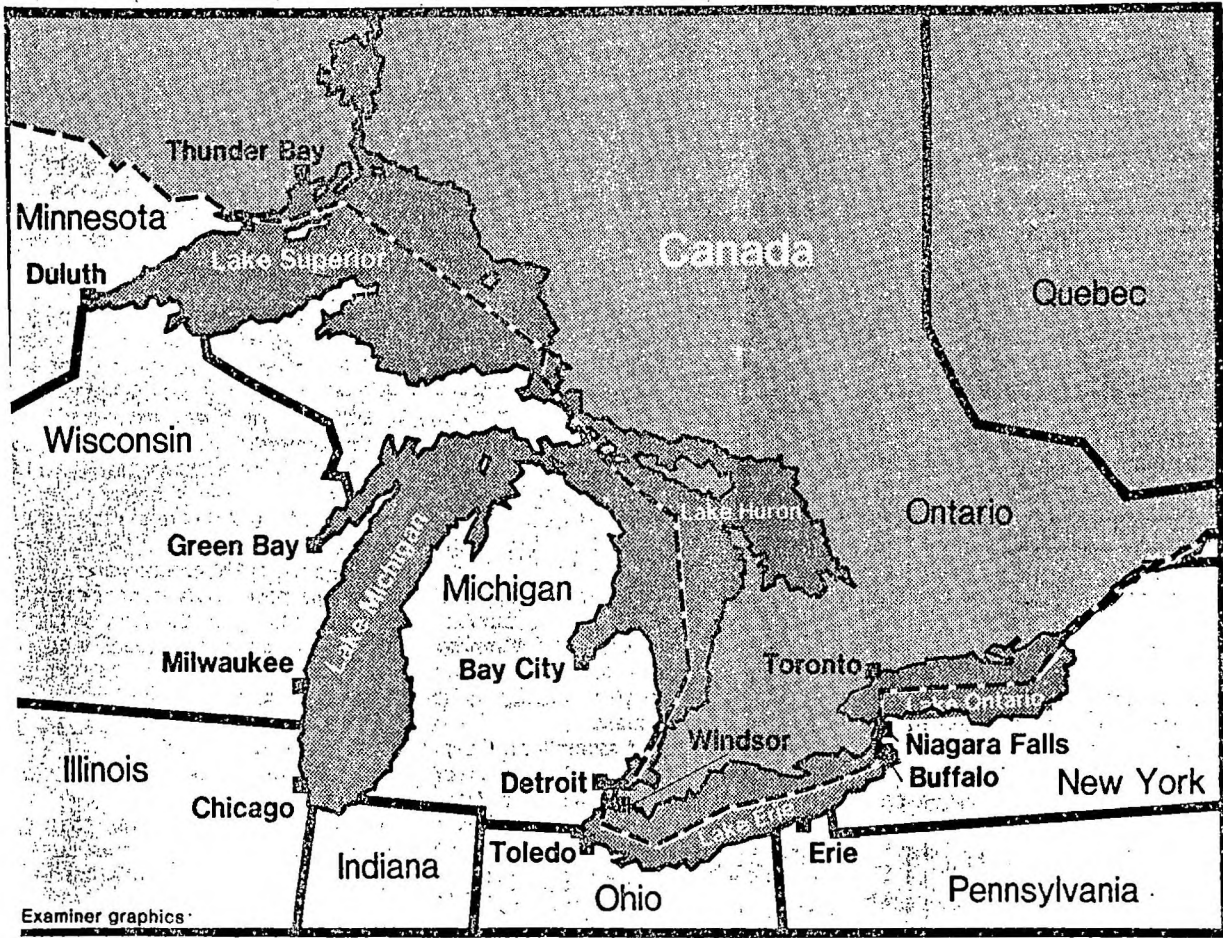
Officials in the EPA's Great Lakes office estimate that industry spent an equal amount.

Treatment plants reduced the amount of phosphorus that went into the lakes. Phosphorus is a nutrient that spurs algae growth. Fuller said phosphorus discharge into Lake Erie was cut from 8,000 metric tons a year in 1975 to 3,000 tons six years later.

Also helpful were six state legislatures that banned the sale of deter-

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Comeback on the Great Lakes



Cuts in government funds cloud future of pollution-control efforts

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found in Lake Michigan fish, she said. Levels of the pesticide in the fish have exceeded the government's allowable limits for food.

Toxaphene is most heavily used in the Dakotas and in the South, scientists say. Its presence in the lakes is "absolutely an airborne problem," Sonzogni says.

The scope of the potential problem of toxic contaminants is staggering. Fifty-two chemicals, including Mirex, a pesticide, and suspected carcinogens like dioxin and PCBs are being monitored in the Niagara River, which links Ontario with the upper Great Lakes.

Acid rain, a more publicized environmental problem, is less significant in the Great Lakes because of their size and the fact that much of the lakes are buffered by a limestone base that counters acidity.

Madonna McGrath, director of the EPA's Great Lakes office, says scientists estimate 60 percent of the PCBs in the lakes come through the air, with

that figure rising to 90 percent in Lake Superior.

McGrath's office has established 35 collection sites to sample airborne pollutants, the first step toward determining the scope of the problem.

"With the air currents, some of this might be coming from as far away as Japan," she said. "Why should the U.S. and Canada spend a lot of money on controls if the problem is that long-range?"

The problem haunting any major pollution-control project is money.

For example, the EPA estimates separating sanitary waste systems from storm sewers in the Great Lakes basin would cost \$8 billion. A tunnel-reservoir system in Chicago alone would cost a projected \$4 billion.

But as the scope of the problems and the costs of the proposed solutions become known, government money is drying up.

Research into Great Lakes pollution has been cut from \$30 million to \$3 million by the Reagan administration, according to a recent study by 10

environmental organizations.

The reduction forced a virtual shutdown of the EPA's Large Lakes Research Laboratory at Grosse Ile, Mich., which had been responsible for finding toxaphene in fish. The EPA's Great Lakes office in Chicago has had its funding nearly halved from \$7.5 million in 1978 to \$3.8 million in the proposed 1983 budget.

The administration proposed eliminating funds for the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory at Ann Arbor, Mich., where scientists study how pollutants move about. Director Dr. Eugene Aubert says legislation to restore funds for the lab, which received \$3.4 million last year, is pending in Congress.

Meanwhile, the Great Lakes Basin Commission, which for 14 years provided planning assistance and information coordination to the federal and state agencies working on the lakes, has been dismantled. 1407

In Buffalo, N.Y., the Great Lakes

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Cutbacks threaten to reverse cleanup efforts

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Laboratory, a non-profit research facility set up after the Buffalo River was declared one of the nation's three worst-polluted rivers, has lost 21 of 25 employees. Its \$700,000 budget is now \$90,000.

"If people didn't monitor the Great Lakes, the Mirex problem, the mercury problem, the PCB problem probably would never have been discovered," said V. Ray Frederick, assistant director. "I think we've got to continue the

search for exotic pollutants."

If responsibility for pollution programs is to be handed over to the states by the Reagan administration, environmentalists say little is likely to be done, considering the financial problems of states like Ohio and Michigan.

"How can we tell the (U.S. and Canadian) governments what to do if the states can't provide us with the data?" asks Bonner of the International Joint Commission, which had relied heavily on the Great Lakes Basin Com-

mission.

U.S. Rep. James Blanchard, D-Mich., claims the Reagan administration is trying to cut federal support of Great Lakes programs by 70 to 80 percent. He has proposed legislation to set up a coordinating office for the 10 government agencies and departments dealing with lakes-related issues.

That proposal was supported in a General Accounting Office report which concluded a more comprehensive approach is needed to clean up the lakes.