



GREAT LAKES UNITED

For Immediate Release
February 12, 1991

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**Great Lakes United Applauds U.S., Canada Declaration of
Erie, Pennsylvania as Newest Great Lakes Area of Concern**

Buffalo, NY -- Great Lakes United commends today the decision of the Canadian and U.S. governments to declare Erie, PA an international Area of Concern.

Erie, PA is the first Area of Concern (AOC) to be established since the first AOC listing was in early 1980s, and the first ever in the State of Pennsylvania. It is the 43rd Great Lakes site to be given this status.

The Area of Concern designation was made in accordance with the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. This Agreement between the U.S. and Canada states that communities whose waters are polluted enough to violate the Agreement must be so designated. Designation as an Area of Concern sets in motion a formal government-sponsored clean-up plan to environmentally restore these sites.

"The historic designation will help accelerate intensive efforts by the Erie community and area government, who already launched a local clean-up effort," said Philip Weller, GLU's Executive Director. In 1988, the City and County appointed the Erie Harbor Improvement Council to address the contamination problem. Through the Council's efforts, a major survey and bay study are now underway. Erie is unique in that it is apparently the only Area of Concern (AOC) to have had a successful grassroots effort that generated the support for a clean-up campaign before the formal federal designation.

Great Lakes United and the Erie County Environmental Coalition had actively sought the AOC designation since 1987 in recognition of the environmental impairments within the area. "The designation is an important step towards restoring the environmental health of Erie Harbor," states Philip Weller. During the successful four-year campaign, the International Joint Commission, Pennsylvania State Legislature, City of Erie Council, County of Erie Council, the National Wildlife Federation, Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, Sierra Club, and dozens of other groups endorsed the effort.

An international organization dedicated to conserving and protecting the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River"

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The Area of Concern designation is a positive statement not only for Erie's environment, but also for its economy. This is because it is likely to attract federal and state support for the clean-up effort -- and remove a part of the financial burden from the local community. The designation will also boost efforts to clean up the bay, which will enhance the tourism and recreation industry. The bay is formed by Presque Isle State Park, the third most heavily visited park in the U.S. However, swimming in the 5-mile long bay is legally prohibited because of health concerns. A major goal of the campaign is to restore swimming to the bay, which would clearly be economically beneficial. It would also benefit waterfront revitalization efforts.

Concerns by some members of the business community that the designation could tarnish Erie's business reputation have not been borne out in other Areas of Concern. Preliminary results from a major survey show that recreation-based economies of other Areas of Concern have not been hurt -- and in some cases have been helped -- by the designation.

Actions by Congress and federal agencies have made it clear that priority would be given to designated Areas of Concern for receiving clean-up funding.

Erie's pollution problems include harbor sediments and fish contaminated with excessive levels of lead, PCBs, PAHs, some pesticides and other heavy metals; a ban on swimming in the bay; beach closings on some of the State Park's lakeside beaches; and restrictions on navigational dredging due to polluted sediments.

The next step will be to appoint a Remedial Action Plan Council comprised of industry, local, state and federal government, public interest groups and area citizens. The existing Erie Harbor Improvement Council is likely to form the basis for the new body.

A new U.S. law, the Great Lakes Critical Programs Act, sets a deadline for completion of the first stage of Remedial Action Plan at two years from now.

Pennsylvania, which is not widely known to have a Great Lakes coast, has 45 miles of Lake Erie shoreline. The nearest Areas of Concern are Ashtabula River, Ohio (40 miles west) and Buffalo River, New York (90 miles northeast).

Great Lakes United is a binational coalition of over 180 sporting, union conservation, environmental, community and research organizations dedicated to the conservation and protection of the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence River ecosystem.