

January 19, 2018

By email: Eric Rennie, Clerk (comm-financeaffairs@ola.org)

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs
Room 1405, Whitney Block
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON
M7A 1A2

Attn: Ann Hoggarth, MPP, Chair

Re: Pre-Budget Consultations

It is time for Ontario's Budget to Address Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin Protection and Restoration

As a province, we are stewards of close to a quarter of Earth's available surface fresh water, and have a responsibility to take action to ensure the ecological health of the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin is protected and restored.

Taking action requires adequate funding. Unfortunately, past provincial budgets have largely remained silent on funding specific to the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin, including funding to fulfill the legislative goals of the [Great Lakes Protection Act, 2015](#) and the [Invasive Species Act, 2015](#), as well as commitments under the [Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health](#) and [Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy](#).

It is our belief that the time has come for the provincial budget to acknowledge the funding needs for freshwater priorities. Greater transparency is needed to let Ontarians know exactly how much is spent on protecting and restoring the ecological health of the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin.

Significant Threats Require Immediate Action

The Great Lakes supply drinking water to almost 80% of Ontarians and support countless commercial and recreational activities. As a region, the Great Lakes-St Lawrence River provinces and states have a GDP of USD \$5.8 trillion, or roughly 28% of combined U.S. and Canadian economic activity. In particular, recreational anglers contribute more than \$600 million to Ontario's economy and Lake Erie's \$240 million commercial fishery is one of the largest in the world.

Despite their importance, the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin is experiencing significant and ongoing threats, which are exacerbated by climate change and population pressures. Many of these threats have already been explicitly recognized in Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy, including:

- Fish and wildlife habitat loss such as wetlands, which affects ecosystem health and costs us commercial and sport fishing opportunities and natural and cultural heritage. Wetlands provide highly important water filtration and flood protection.
- Invasive species causing significant harm to ecosystems and pushing out native species. If Asian carp establish themselves in the Great Lakes, it could devastate ecosystems and fisheries.
- Harmful chemicals, some of which cannot be removed by current sewage treatment facilities. For example, endocrine disrupting substances that are found in some pesticides, plastics, flame retardants, and fragrances can negatively impact reproduction and brain function in people and animals, and increase the risk of some cancers.
- Algal blooms. Algae outbreaks in Lake Erie have compromised drinking water sources, clogged water intake pipes, impeded recreational uses, degraded aquatic habitat, and threatened fish populations.
- Excessive bacteria levels from sources such as sewage and septic systems, waterfowl, and runoff from rural and urban areas.
- Flooding, the risk and magnitude of which is increased by climate change. The 2013 storm that swamped the Greater Toronto Area caused more than \$850 million in property damage.

As this list makes clear, serious and significant challenges exist in the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin. The time to ensure adequate funding within the provincial budget for policies, plans, and programs that address these challenges is now.

Increasing Transparency and Including the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin in Ontario's Budget

As explained in Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy, there are already policies, plans, and programs in place that are aimed at protecting and restoring the ecological health of the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin. Further, Ontario has enacted legislation with laudable goals that, if fully implemented, will allow us to realize benefits of a healthy and resilient ecosystem, including the *Great Lakes Protection Act, 2015* and the *Invasive Species Act, 2015*.

What we do not yet have, is transparency when it comes to funding. Without funding, Ontario cannot address the identified threats and will be unable complete the goals it has already set out. And, without knowledge of the current level of funding, it is impossible for the public to determine if sufficient investments are being made to protect the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin from these threats.

Given the importance of fresh water and the ongoing threats, we therefore believe that the provincial budget should include clear and transparent information on the financial commitments

being made by Ontario to protect and restore the ecological health of the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin across all relevant ministries.

Moving forward, we therefore propose that this information be included in the form of a dedicated section in the budget, which outlines the government's commitments for spending on Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin protection and restoration, including spending on the above mentioned threats and issues.

This information should include a statement of how much the Province intends to spend to address these issues in 2018 and in subsequent years, as well as a list of the actual activities that are currently being funded and activities that the government intends to fund.

The provincial budget should also set out the estimated total costs needed to avoid an irreversible decline in the ecological health of the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin and, to the extent no such estimate exists, the budget should set aside funds to prepare such an estimate.

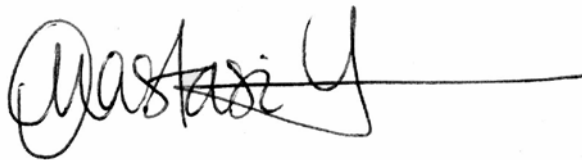
In addition to the obvious harm they cause to the environment, the threats listed above are likely to have significant negative economic impacts, which will only increase if we do not act now.

We therefore believe it is imperative to provide an assessment of the present and future economic impact of these threats – to be compared to the cost of taking appropriate steps to avoid this impact. This will provide an actual measure of the financial consequences we may face if we do not allocate sufficient funding to protect and restore the ecological health of the Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin.

At the heart of our budget proposals lies the fact that the importance of a healthy Great Lakes - St Lawrence River Basin to Ontario's environment, economy and society cannot be understated. Water is crucial to the health of Ontario's people, wildlife, ecosystems, and affects all parts of the provincial economy.

We will therefore be looking for significant progress toward protection and restoration of the ecological health of the Great Lakes-St Lawrence River Basin, and believe investments outlined in the provincial budget will be key to this progress.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anastasia M. Lintner", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Anastasia M. Lintner, PhD, LLB
Special Projects Counsel, Healthy Great Lakes