

EDU-71

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EDITOR'S PICK

Eighteenmile Creek cleanup advanced

ENVIRONMENT: \$1B from US infrastructure plan going toward cleanup of Great Lakes Areas of Concern by 2030.

Staff and wire reports

Feb 17, 2022



Upson Park is on the list of contaminated commercial and residential properties in Lockport that will be remediated using funding from the U.S. Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021. The park is in the Eighteenmile Creek Corridor Superfund site, which stretches 13 miles from the Erie Canal to the mouth of Lake Ontario at Olcott. (US&J file photo)



President Joe Biden declared Thursday that a \$1 billion infusion from the bipartisan infrastructure deal would restore the Great Lakes harbors and tributary rivers that have been polluted by industrial toxins. On the work list is the stretch of Eighteenmile Creek between Lockport and Olcott, a long-listed Great

Lakes Area of Concern.

Biden ventured close to the banks of Lake Erie to speak in Lorain, Ohio, a small city that once housed a shipbuilder, a Ford plant and a U.S. Steel factory and is now adapting to a post-industrial economy. Biden pledged that the investment in cleaning the waterways was as much about jobs as the environment, citing a note that Democratic Rep. Marcy Kaptur handed to him after an address last year to a joint session of Congress.

"That letter was about the Great Lakes," the president said. "(They) support more than 1.3 million jobs in manufacturing tourism, transportation, warehousing, farming and fishing."

The \$1 billion for the Great Lakes from the bipartisan measure enacted in November, combined with annual funding through an ongoing recovery program, will enable agencies by 2030 to finish work on 22 sites designated a quarter-century ago as among the region's most degraded, officials said Thursday.

The Eighteenmile Creek Area of Concern also is a registered U.S. Superfund cleanup site. A four-phase, long-term remediation plan got underway in 2016 in Lockport. In addition to remediating contaminated industrial and residential properties along or near the creek in the city, the plan calls for removing contaminants in creek sediment throughout the Eighteenmile Creek Corridor.

The corridor is contaminated with toxins including PCBs and heavy metals. The area around the Burt Dam is also a big sportfishing draw, but due to the pollution, posted warnings advise against eating the fish. The state Department of Environmental Conservation previously declared a series of "beneficial use impairments" on the corridor including: restrictions on eating fish or wildlife, degradation of fish and wildlife populations, bird or animal deformities or reproductive problems, and degradation of benthos (flora and fauna at the creek bottom).

The Great Lakes provide drinking water for 40 million people and underpin the economy in eight Northeastern and Midwestern states and two Canadian provinces. They fueled a 20th century industrial boom that generated wealth and jobs but caused ecological devastation.

The U.S. and Canada listed 43 areas of concern — 31 of them in the U.S. — as toxic hot spots in 1987, largely because of contaminated sediments that make the waters unsuitable for fishing, swimming and other uses.

But while cleanup plans were crafted, they languished with little funding until the Obama administration kicked off the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative in 2010.

It's been one of the few matters on which the region's congressional Democrats and Republicans routinely agree. They thwarted President Donald Trump's early efforts to gut the program, which GOP lawmakers from Michigan eventually persuaded him to support.

Because of progress under the initiative, which has received nearly \$4 billion, the Environmental Protection Agency has dropped six areas of concern from the list and finished work at 11 others. They'll also be removed after scientists determine they have recovered, depending on factors such as whether wildlife populations are thriving.

Of 25 U.S. sites still on the list, only three are expected to need further work by 2030, officials said. They include the St. Lawrence River in New York and Michigan's Kalamazoo River, as well as the Saginaw River and Bay.

Among those where work should be done by then are Waukegan, Illinois; the Grand Calumet River in Indiana; the St. Louis River in Minnesota and Wisconsin; the Black and Cuyahoga rivers and Maumee, Ohio; the Niagara and Buffalo rivers, Eighteenmile Creek and the Rochester Embayment in New York; Wisconsin's Fox River, Milwaukee Estuary and Sheboygan; and Michigan's Muskegon Lake, River Raisin and Torch Lake along with the Clinton, Detroit, Manistique, Rouge, St. Clair and St. Marys rivers.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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