
(December 10, 2007) Great Lakes supporters want pledge from presidential hopefuls

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TRAVERSE CITY - Several members of Congress are seeking a promise from presidential hopefuls in both parties to support a Great Lakes water quality project expected to cost at least \$20 billion.

The two leading Democrats - Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Clinton of New York - said today they had signed a pledge submitted last month by the lawmakers and a Great Lakes environmental coalition. It asks each candidate to make implementing and funding the plan a top priority if elected.

The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration was developed in 2005 by a broad partnership of government agencies, advocacy groups, scientists and others. It calls for a coordinated response to a series of problems damaging the ecosystem, such as invasive species, toxic pollution, sewer overflows and wildlife habitat loss.

Supporters say state and local governments can help, but the federal government must take the lead because of the complexity and cost. Bills introduced in Congress have made little progress, and backers say White House support is crucial for pushing them to enactment.

In a statement, Obama said he would give the project "real support, real financial resources and real leadership from the federal government." Clinton's campaign described her as "a longtime advocate for the protection and restoration of the Great Lakes."

Republican Mitt Romney is still reviewing the pledge but "understands that the Great Lakes are one of our country's national treasures," said a spokesman for the former Massachusetts governor, who grew up in Michigan.

A spokesman for Republican Fred Thompson said the only pledge he would take "is to the American people," but added that the former Tennessee senator wanted to make sure "the millions who depend on (the Great Lakes) for drinking water or their livelihood will be able to depend on them in the future."

Giuliani, Mike Huckabee and John McCain.

The plan originally carried an estimated price tag of about \$20 billion. But inflation and delay likely have pushed the cost as high as \$27 billion, said Jeff Skelding, national campaign director for the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition.

"Presidential commitment to the Great Lakes means one thing: fully funding restoration now, because the longer we wait, the problems get worse and more costly," Skelding said.

A recent Brookings Institution study concluded that restoring the lakes to health would generate at least \$50 billion in economic growth.

Letters issuing the presidential challenge were sent by two Democrats - Reps. Rahm Emanuel and Dan Lipinski of Illinois - and Republican Reps. Mark Kirk of Illinois and Vernon Ehlers of Michigan. They are sponsoring bills to implement the collaboration strategy.

A promise on the campaign trail doesn't guarantee fulfillment after the election. Ehlers, however, said taking the Great Lakes pledge would represent more than empty talk.

"If it's signed and they forget, you can wave it and remind them," he said.

The exercise also will prod the candidates and their staffs to learn more about the Great Lakes' problems and importance, making up 95 percent of the nation's surface fresh water, he added.

Presidential hopefuls ignore the lakes at their peril, Ehlers said. The eight-state region still wields heavy political clout despite the Sun Belt's growing influence.

"It is going to take strong commitments to provide the necessary resources to restore the lakes," Emanuel said.