



At a Glance

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Grants Documented Most Achievements, but the EPA Could Improve Monitoring and Reporting

Why We Did This Audit

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General conducted this audit to determine the extent to which the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grants support the EPA's program goals for the Great Lakes.

In September 2023, we issued a related report, EPA OIG Report No. [23-P-0034](#) to address whether the EPA awarded and monitored GLRI grants in accordance with federal laws, regulations, policies, and procedures.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is a partnership among 16 federal agencies, including the EPA, that funds the restoration of the Great Lakes ecosystem. From fiscal year 2010 through 2021, the initiative distributed \$3.2 billion in grants.

To support this EPA mission-related effort:

- *Partnering with states and other stakeholders.*

To address these top EPA management challenges:

- *Integrating and implementing environmental justice.*
- *Managing grants, contracts, and data systems.*

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What We Found

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, or GLRI, grants we reviewed documented contributions to the EPA's program goals for the Great Lakes including protection of habitats, reduction of discharges of untreated stormwater, and management of invasive species. However, the GLRI grant recipients did not always include environmental justice outputs and outcomes in their final reports.

Grant recipients have the option to include environmental justice outputs and outcomes in their work plans. If included, recipients are required by the grant agreement to report all results, including environmental justice-related results, in their progress and final project reports. Fourteen, or around 47 percent, of the 30 GLRI grants we reviewed included expected outputs and outcomes for environmental justice goals in the work plans. Of this subset, only four, or roughly 29 percent, of the 14 grants clearly documented the achievement of these results in the final project reports. GLRI grant recipients did not always report whether they achieved environmental justice-related activities in their final project reports, nor did EPA project officers monitor whether the GLRI grant recipients included all outputs and outcomes in their final project reports.

The Clean Water Act requires that the Agency submit annual reports detailing the GLRI's progress and spending to Congress. At the beginning of our audit, we observed that the Agency submitted annual reports for FYs 2010 through 2017, but it had not issued reports for FYs 2018 through 2021. The delayed issuance of the FY 2018 required report was complicated by several administrative factors outside the Agency's control, to include changes in administration, which delayed issuance of subsequent required reports. The Agency did subsequently submit reports to Congress for FYs 2018 and 2019 in December 2021 and September 2022, respectively. In April 2023, the Agency submitted a combined GLRI report to Congress for FYs 2020 and 2021.

By improving reporting of environmental results, the EPA can better show how GLRI money is spent to protect and restore the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the regional administrator for EPA Region 5 require periodic training and provide learning resources for project officers, update the final report template and guidance for grant recipients, evaluate and report environmental justice-related outputs and outcomes of GLRI grants, and submit annual reports to Congress as required by the Clean Water Act. We also recommend that the associate administrator for Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations implement a process to verify that required reports to Congress are tracked and submitted in a timely manner. The EPA agreed with all recommendations and provided planned corrective actions and milestones that meet the intent of Recommendations 1, 3, and 4. The EPA completed corrective actions for Recommendations 2 and 5.