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Don't let funding evaporate for worthy Great Lakes plan; [Final Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The blueprint arose from a process started by the [Bush] administration in May 2004. The president signed an executive order designating the lakes a "national treasure" and creating a task force to coordinate the various federal agencies involved in the lake system. The then-head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Mike Leavitt, asked Mayor Daley and Ohio Gov. Bob Taft to put together a regional collaboration. After a year of work involving more than 1,500 people from various public and private agencies, the blueprint was unveiled last December.

Full Text (445 words)

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Last December, a group of regional leaders held a press conference to announce their blueprint for protecting and restoring the Great Lakes. They insisted the announcement was no publicity stunt, while acknowledging that the real work of finding \$20 billion to pay for the 15-year plan was just beginning.

That work got even more difficult earlier this month, when President Bush proposed no money for the plan in his 2007 budget.

The blueprint arose from a process started by the Bush administration in May 2004. The president signed an executive order designating the lakes a "national treasure" and creating a task force to coordinate the various federal agencies involved in the lake system. The then-head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Mike Leavitt, asked Mayor Daley and Ohio Gov. Bob Taft to put together a regional collaboration. After a year of work involving more than 1,500 people from various public and private agencies, the blueprint was unveiled last December.

The blueprint makes the case for why restoration is important. The Great Lakes system holds 20 percent of the world's fresh water and 90 percent of America's. The lakes support tourism, boating, fishing, agriculture and other industries. Boating on the lakes, for instance, accounts for \$35 billion in annual economic activity. Hunting, fishing and other wildlife watching accounts for nearly \$18 billion annually.

Among the highlights, the restoration plan recommends steps to stop the introduction of invasive species; to conserve habitats and manage native plants and animals; to improve controls over storm and sanitary sewer discharges; to protect sources of drinking water; to accelerate the cleanup of the most contaminated locations on the lakes; to identify and eliminate sources of pollution, and to better coordinate the information we have about the lake system.

None of those goals can happen without money. But even as a draft of the blueprint was unveiled last summer, federal officials were warning that funding would be scarce. Daley and the governors of all eight Great Lakes states asked for \$300 million in matching funds as a start, but the answer from Bush was zilch.

The Sun-Times News Group believes that it's up to the regional lawmakers who signed the blueprint, both Democratic and Republican, to put some money in the budget for this worthy proposal. The Bush administration shouldn't be allowed to put this project on the backburner. State and local governments will also be called upon to contribute. Otherwise, the unprecedented work on Great Lakes protection by the regional leaders will turn out to be water down the drain.

This editorial expresses the viewpoint of the Sun-Times News Group of 100 newspapers in the Chicago metro area.

Credit: The Chicago Sun-Times

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