

Federal effort eyes restoring the Great Lakes

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The Great Lakes, including the waters along North Shore beaches, may get cleaner as a result of two initiatives.

At the national level, a bill introduced in Congress this week would create a Great Lakes Restoration fund of \$4 billion for restoring the Great Lakes and their tributaries.

The bill to create the Great Lakes Restoration fund has 14 sponsors, including U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th of Highland Park. He said his recent effort at regulating mercury emissions gave him a better idea of how unhealthy Lake Michigan is.

"As I got involved in the mercury problem, I learned more and more about the other problems facing our lake," Kirk said.

He pointed to three problems that are getting worse: mercury pollution, invasive species such as the Asian and urban runoff, which picks up pollutants before draining into the lake.

"I hope the federal government will expand its vision and look at the Great Lakes as one ecosystem, because they are all connected," Kirk said. "What's a problem in one of the lakes will be, eventually, a problem in all of the lakes."

Valuable asset

The Great Lakes and their connecting channels form the largest freshwater system on Earth, providing 90 percent of the nation's fresh surface water.

Regardless of how large the Great Lakes water system is, local beaches are highly susceptible to pollution. In 2002 there were a record 397 Lake Michigan beach closings due to contamination.

In addition, 20 percent of the Lake Michigan shoreline contains polluted sediment, and state and local authorities have issued more than 1,500 fish consumption advisories in the Great Lakes.

Kirk and Chicago's U.S. Rep. Rahm Emanuel, D-5th, announced plans for the Great Lakes Restoration fund last week, with the 14 co-sponsors representing all of the Great Lakes States: Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota and New

York.

The legislation would set aside \$4 billion over five years, \$800 million each year, for block grants available to the Great Lakes states. The money would finance restoration and revitalization projects, including cleaning up toxic hot spots,

“If an area needs environmental remediation, the plan for how to clean up that area requires unanimous approval, and signatures from no less than five state and federal agencies.

Inevitably, one of them says no.”

-U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk

combating invasive species, controlling pollution from urban and agricultural runoff, restoring and conserving wetlands and other coastal habitats and increasing public education of issues related to the health of the Great Lakes.

To qualify, states would have to develop management plans approved by the Environmental Protection Agency so they would support the president's Great Lakes Strategy 2002.

Advisory board

The bill will also establish a Great Lakes Advisory Board, which includes the governors of the Great Lakes states, federal representatives, local mayors and business leaders. The board would create a Great Lakes Management Plan to analyze restoration efforts and recommend to Congress which restoration projects should be strengthened, contracted or eliminated.

A second part of the bill would allow the federal government to appoint a project manager at sites in need of environmental clean-up if local officials take too long to agree on clean-up plans of their own.

"This is something I learned

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